

UNIVERSITY OF TAMPERE  
School of Management

# **THE CREDIBILITY OF ONLINE CONSUMER REVIEWS**

## **Case Lumene**

Marketing  
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# ABSTRACT

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As an affirmed form of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM), online consumer reviews have built a significant presence on the Internet during the past decade. In the modern virtual environment it is ordinary for consumers to scroll through consumer feedback or sort search results by customer star ratings. As more and more time is spent in social networks and consumer-generated media platforms, the more our personal experiences are evolving from oral to a digital form. Online consumer reviews have lured their way to the very core of conventional Internet behavior and product information from a consumer point of view has not only become valuable in terms of receiving impartial and reliable insight from peer consumers, but has also become a tremendous aid in the consumer's decision-making process.

The purpose of the study is to describe and analyze how consumers evaluate the credibility of eWOM in online consumer reviews. The study utilizes informational and normative determinants to evaluate the credibility of text-based computer-mediated communications that consumers read online. The study focuses on reviews written on beauty products and therefore analyses eWOM solely from a beauty product perspective.

This case study focuses on consumer reviews written on the products of a Finnish market leading cosmetics brand, Lumene. The study is conducted as mixed methods research where netnography is supported by content analysis method. Altogether 292 online consumer reviews were used for analysis. 161 reviews originated from a Finnish beauty review portal called Beautify.fi and 131 reviews from the comment field of a blog written by a beauty blogger, Saara Sarvas.

The research provides deeper insight on how helpful online consumer reviews are to consumers when they make purchase decisions, especially purchase decisions on beauty products. The research finds the most essential factors that consumers use to evaluate the credibility in online consumer reviews: argument quality, information framing, source credibility, information consistency, normative cues and amplified eWOM. All these factors are likely to increase or decrease the credibility of an online consumer review; however the actual credibility assessment of the consumer is the synopsis of all these determinants. The study offers useful managerial advice that can be used as a guideline when engaging in textual discourse with consumers online.

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Kuluttajien nettiarvostelujen määrä on kasvanut huimasti viimeisen vuosikymmenen aikana. Niistä on tullut yleinen muoto elektronista word-of-mouth viestintää (eWOM). Tämän päivän modernissa virtuaalisessa ympäristössä kuluttajien on tavanomaista selailla muiden kuluttajien kirjoittamia palautteita ja lajitella hakutuloksia tähti-arvosteluiden perusteella. Nykyään kun aikaa vietetään enemmän sosiaalisissa medioissa ja kuluttajien tuottaman sisällön alustoilla, henkilökohtaiset kokemukset ovat muuttuvat suullisesta muodosta digitaaliseen muotoon. Kuluttajien nettiarvostelut ovat raivanneet tiensä tavallisen Internet käyttäytymisen ytimeen. Tuoteinformaatiosta on tullut suuri apu kuluttajien ostopäätöksenteossa tarjoten hyödyllistä, puolueetonta ja luotettavaa tietoa muiden kuluttajien kokemuksista.

Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoitus on kuvata ja analysoida sitä, kuinka kuluttajat arvioivat elektronisen word-of-mouth viestinnän uskottavuutta kuluttajien nettiarvosteluissa. Tutkimus arvioi nettiarvosteluiden uskottavuutta informatiivisten ja normatiivisten tekijöiden pohjalta analysoiden kuluttajien tuottamia tekstejä netissä. Tutkimus keskittyy tutkimaan nettiarvosteluita, jotka koskevat kauneustuotteita ja täten analysoi eWOM -viestintää erityisesti kauneustuotteiden näkökulmasta.

Tämä tutkimus toteutetaan tapaustutkimuksena, jossa keskitytään kuluttajien nettiarvosteluihin, jotka koskevat suomalaisen kosmetiikkabrändi Lumenen tuotteita. Tutkimus suoritetaan monimetodisena tutkimuksena, jossa netnografisen tutkimuksen tukena hyödynnetään sisällönanalyysia. Aineisto muodostuu 292 nettiarvostelusta, joista 161 nettiarvostelua on kerätty suomalaiselta Beautify.fi käyttökokemusfoorumilta ja 131 nettiarvostelua Saara Sarvaksen kauneusblogin kommenttikentältä.

Tutkimus tarjoaa syvemmän ymmärryksen siitä, kuinka hyödyllisiä kuluttajien nettiarvostelut ovat tiedonlähteenä, etenkin kuluttajien tehdessä ostopäätöksiä kauneustuotteiden osalta. Tutkimus löytää ja kokoaa yhteen ne keskeiset tekijät, joiden avulla kuluttajien nettiarvosteluiden uskottavuutta voidaan arvioida. Näitä ovat argumentin laatu, viestin sävy, lähteen uskottavuus, informaation yhtenäisyys, normatiiviset elementit ja vahvistettu eWOM. Tutkimus tarjoaa myös hyödyllisiä liiketoiminnallisia neuvoja, joita voidaan käyttää hyväksi silloin, kun halutaan osallistua kuluttajien väliseen keskusteluun netissä.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>7</b>
1.1	Online consumer reviews as a web 2.0 phenomenon.....	7
1.2	The purpose of the study and research questions .....	9
<b>2</b>	<b>THE CREDIBILITY OF EWOM.....</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1	The concept of electronic word-of-mouth .....	12
2.1.1	Word-of-mouth.....	12
2.1.2	Electronic word-of-mouth .....	14
2.1.3	Organic and amplified eWOM .....	17
2.2	The concept of credibility.....	19
2.3	Online consumer reviews .....	20
2.4	Exploring eWOM credibility.....	23
2.4.1	Informational determinants .....	25
2.4.2	Normative determinants .....	30
2.4.3	Cues for bias & validity.....	32
2.4.4	Synthesis of the theoretical framework .....	34
<b>3</b>	<b>CONDUCTING THE STUDY .....</b>	<b>37</b>
3.1	Research strategy .....	37
3.2	Case Lumene .....	39
3.2.1	The role of consumer information in the beauty market .....	39
3.2.2	Conducting the case study .....	41
3.3	Mixed methods approach.....	43
3.3.1	Qualitative research approach .....	45
3.3.2	Netnography as a research method.....	46
3.3.3	Content analysis.....	49
3.4	Collecting online consumer reviews.....	51
3.5	Ensuring the quality of the study .....	54
<b>4</b>	<b>EVALUATING THE CREDIBILITY OF CONSUMER REVIEWS.....</b>	<b>58</b>
4.1	Argument quality .....	59
4.2	Framing.....	67
4.3	Source credibility.....	69

4.4	Information consistency .....	76
4.5	Normative cues .....	76
4.6	Amplified eWOM.....	80
4.7	Conclusions and managerial implications .....	81
<b>5</b>	<b>SUMMARY .....</b>	<b>91</b>
	<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>95</b>
	<b>APPENDICES.....</b>	<b>104</b>

## LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Occurrence of informational determinants.....	104
Appendix 2. Example of an online consumer review on Beautify.fi.....	105
Appendix 3. Example of an online consumer review on Beautify.fi.....	106
Appendix 4. Example of an online consumer review on Beautify.fi .....	107
Appendix 5. Example of an online consumer review from the blog.....	108
Appendix 6. Example of an online consumer review from the blog .....	108
Appendix 7. Evaluating the credibility of online reviews on Beautify.fi .....	109
Appendix 8. Evaluating the credibility of online reviews on the blog... ..	110
Appendix 9. Example of an ideal online consumer review.....	111

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Evaluating argument quality by four dimensions.....	27
Table 2. Key supportive theories used in the study.....	35

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. The role of eWOM in the purchase decision process.....	16
Figure 2. Organic and amplified eWOM.....	18
Figure 3. Knowledge sharing in online social platforms.....	22
Figure 4. Evaluating eWOM through cues.....	33
Figure 5. Synthesis of the determinants used to evaluate credibility.....	36
Figure 6. Logical canvas for the study outline .....	37
Figure 7. The research process of the study.....	38
Figure 8. Strengths and weaknesses of mixed methods approach.....	44
Figure 9. Checklist for quality assurance of the case study.....	56
Figure 10. Evaluating review consistency.....	77
Figure 11. Practical tips for marketers.....	88

# 1 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Online consumer reviews as a web 2.0 phenomenon

*I'm a great believer that any tool that enhances communication has profound effects in terms of how people can learn from each other, and how they can achieve the kind of freedoms that they're interested in.*

(William Henry “Bill” Gates III (1955–))

Today, anyone with Internet connectivity can access and post information online. Tagging, posting and sharing videos on YouTube are community-related activities, not to mention the numerous blogs, forums, chat rooms and social networking websites that keep us on a 24-hour interactive media roller coaster. The mighty Internet is able to satisfy all the uncountable needs we have to be a part of the world that surrounds us. Notably, social media is a gigantic phenomenon of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that consists of enormous amounts of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) content (Kietzmann & Canhoto, 2013, 147). Not only has eWOM become a significant enabler of consumer-to-consumer interaction, it is more trusted by consumers than traditional advertising (Bickart & Schindler 2001; Goldsmith & Horowitz 2006; Okazaki 2008). Marketers have realized the importance of it as a communication process and now motivate consumers to engage in it as much as possible. For instance, online retailers like Walmart.com and Amazon.com encourage consumers to post product reviews, whether negative or positive, to help other consumers with their buying decisions. Another example is Ebay.com, which in turn has adapted a reputation ranking system based on comments made by sellers and buyers. (Wang & Rodgers 2011, 212)

A constantly growing form of eWOM is online consumer reviews that represent a massive and expanding genre of online discourse (Vasquez 2012, 119). This easily reachable, publicly available and credible form of consumer information has opened a door to an entirely new study environment and has fused itself into a multiplicity of web

2.0 platforms. An individual website alone can hold hundreds of millions of reviews (e.g. TripAdvisor). Inevitably, the amount of consumer reviews is immense, excluding the number of reviews written by parties other than consumers, such as organizations. One of the first websites that gave consumers the option to post comments on products online was Amazon.com in 1995. After 10 years, Amazon.com had gathered over 10 million consumer reviews that covered all its product categories. Undoubtedly, these consumer reviews are what make Amazon.com one of the most popular e-commerce powerhouses of today. (New York Times, 2004)

According to the Nielsen Global Trust in Advertising report of 2013, online consumer reviews have become the second most trusted source of brand information and messaging. The opportunity to read online consumer reviews provided by other individuals choosing to share their consumption experiences is a fine example of consumer-to-consumer interaction and value creation between a large group of stakeholders. (Vargo & Lusch, 2004, 2008) As interaction between consumers occurs more and more online, there is a clear shift in narratives of personal experience from oral to digital form. (Vasquez 2012, 119) Furthermore, consumer reviews are a simple and easy way to search for product information, as consumer opinions are widely and effortlessly accessible and can be circulated and shared by just a few clicks of the mouse. Moreover, it can be said that consumer reviews are a supplement to product descriptions, expert reviews and automated recommendation system advice (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010). Without question, digitalization is a force to reckon with and online consumer reviews are its progeny.

On another note, online consumer reviews represent a change of control in marketing communications. It is no longer marketers who own the thrown; on the contrary, consumers now have the power to create their own information about products, brands and consumption behavior. (Burton & Khammash 2010, 230) Online consumer reviews play an essential role in the consumer's purchase decision process and can have a big influence on consumer attitudes. However, the line between nonsense and truthful content is pencil-thin and as a result consumers are faced with a problem on whether to trust the information or not.



## 1.2 The purpose of the study and research questions

*Credibility is always a major concern for eWOM receivers. They are not always able to critically assess eWOM information in the way they would if the advice were obtained from friends or family. Nevertheless, the aggregation power of on-line discussion forums provides additional cues, such as normative opinions, that give information readers more ways to evaluate the credibility of on-line recommendations, as compared to off-line WOM communications. As a result, when readers process the information in eWOM communication, they do not simply consider traditional informational factors as important criteria to judge the credibility of the information, but also use the normative cues that are now easily accessed in an on-line context. (Cheung, Luo, Sia & Chen, 2009, 11)*

EWOM has been a branch of study since NCSA Mosaic, the first user-friendly web browser that was established in 1993 (Zwass, 1996, 3). However, it was not until after the millennium that the subject got attention in notable marketing journals and hence research on eWOM is still fairly young. However, during the past few years the research stream has skyrocketed which, in itself, shows the significance of this phenomenon to academics and practitioners. (Breazeale, 2009, 298)

20 years ago marketers did not have to give thought to discussion boards, online feedback mechanisms, customer complaint websites or blogs. Today all these are important concerns for marketers who continuously struggle to trail consumer activities in the world of web 2.0. (Zwass 1996, 3) The new digital revolution has made it possible for consumers, who are strangers to each other and share no apparent commonalities, to come together to form communities and express their opinions on brands and products. Although a lot of research has already been conducted in this field the diversity of eWOM offers countless opportunities for future research, as consumer-to-consumer interaction takes place in a very public forum providing new fruitful sources of data for research.

During recent years online consumer information sharing has been a popular research area (Zhang & Watts, 2003). However, previous studies that have studied eWOM have

mostly been interested in the behavior of the eWOM message sender, especially in terms of sharing motivations or inhibitions. Too little attention has been given to the receiver of the eWOM message (Rafaeli & Raban, 2005). As many studies have shown, the influence of eWOM on readers and their purchase decisions is significant. Moreover, this strong influence on purchase intentions and behavior may have a considerable impact on sales. On that note, researchers such as Henning-Thurau and Walsh (2003) studied the motives of eWOM readers and how this impacts purchase behavior and communication behavior. Their research showed that consumers read online consumer reviews to save decision-making time and to make good buying decisions. However, their study did not explain how consumers are able to evaluate the helpfulness of eWOM as a source of information to support their buying decisions.

Consequently, Cheung, Luo, Sia & Chen (2009) carried out a study to fill this gap in the eWOM literature and determined the factors that influence credibility judgments of online consumer reviews. This study follows their approach and analyses these determinants from the perspective of online consumer reviews written on beauty products.

The general purpose of the study is to describe and analyze how consumers evaluate the credibility of online consumer reviews. Two research questions are set to attain this purpose:

- 1) What indicators do consumers use to evaluate the credibility of online consumer reviews?
- 2) How do credibility indicators differ between reviews written on review websites and reviews written on blogs?

This study utilizes findings from previous studies and adapts them to a new research setting. The study specifically studies online consumer reviews written by Finnish consumers on Finnish cosmetics products, which have not been studied previously in a eWOM setting. Online consumer reviews on cosmetics products are particularly

interesting for the fact that they are typically rich in characteristics and require detailed descriptions. Therefore, they provide an appealing study data in terms of content. The study not only aims to gain better insight on what factors indicate eWOM credibility, but also provides practical recommendations and a comprehensive description of how consumers evaluate credibility while reading online consumer reviews.

The study begins with chapter 1 which introduces the study subject and highlights the purpose of the research. Chapter 2 continues with a presentation of the theoretical literature in chapter 2, which aims to gain a deeper understanding on what kind of factors consumers use to assess the trustworthiness of consumer messages. The chapter also provides an overview on the important role that online consumer reviews play for consumers seeking for information. Most essential message characteristics are pulled together to create a set of determinants that can be used to evaluate eWOM in terms of credibility. Chapter three presents the research process and approach of the study, ending with an evaluation of quality. The case study is conducted on a Finnish cosmetics brand Lumene, more specifically, on the online consumer reviews that are written on Lumene's products. The choice behind the case is explained. Chapter three also describes the data collection and analysis process that took place in this study.

The empirical findings are presented in chapter four, where data is examined and conclusions drawn on how consumers are able to evaluate eWOM credibility from online consumer reviews written on Lumene. All online consumer reviews are analyzed one by one after which interpretations are pulled together to make conclusions. Furthermore, managerial implications are provided. Chapter five summarizes the study on both theoretical and empirical fronts and underlines the core findings of the study.

## **2 THE CREDIBILITY OF EWOM**

### **2.1 The concept of electronic word-of-mouth**

The research on interpersonal communications and its impact on behavior and attitudes dates back many decades to when it was mainly of interest to sociologists and psychologists. (Sweeney, Sourtar & Mazzarol, 2008, 345–346) Traditional communication theories state that social communication consists of four different factors: the sender, the stimuli (message), the receiver and the response. This can be considered to have been an important cornerstone for word-of-mouth (WOM) research, which over the years has evolved from traditional form into something new and modern, the electronic form of word-of-mouth. As a common form of eWOM online consumer reviews are the result of this evolvement. In order to fully comprehend the credibility of online consumer reviews we need to shine light on the larger concept of word-of-mouth and its electronic extension.

#### **2.1.1 Word-of-mouth**

Traditional word-of-mouth refers to oral, person to person communication between a receiver and a communicator whom the receiver perceives as non-commercial, concerning a brand, a product or a service (Arndt, 1967, 3). In other words, WOM can be described as messages that concern specific products or brands and are sent and received between consumers. (Westbrook, 1987) In addition, a traditional definition for WOM communication is that of Brown and Reingen (1987, 351) who conceptualize WOM as a communicative process whereby information is transferred through interpersonal networks in face-to-face settings. This implies that WOM can only occur in a face-to-face context where tie strength plays a big role in whether one finds the message persuasive or not. Furthermore, WOM has a significant role for organizations, as it is seen as a highly credible source of information which originates from

independent senders who are considered to have no alternative motives to promote the organization in question. (Silverman, 2001)

WOM has been widely studied and has received its fair share of attention in the academic field. Although the first International Word of Mouth Marketing Conference was held only 10 years ago, pioneers of WOM research have patted the way for others long before that. For instance, Engel, Blackwell & Kegerreis discovered in 1969 that WOM is more effective than other marketing tools or traditional advertising in regard to purchasing decisions. On the other hand, Herr, Kardar & Kim (1991), researched the effect of WOM on pre-usage attitudes, and Anderson (1998) pinpointed how and why WOM is created. Some researchers have also focused on how WOM affects firms, especially the consumer decision process and the firm's sales (Garrett 1987; Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry, 1985). However, Sweeney et al. (2008, 345–346) point out that WOM research still needs to focus more on understanding the factors that enhance WOM effectiveness, since the majority of WOM research has focused on its generation. They state that recognizing the factors that improve the effect of WOM would be a helpful tool for marketers, especially for potential promotional advantages.

All and all, WOM has been acknowledged as the most important source between consumers (Derbaix & Vanhamme, 2003). It has been researched that interpersonal communications between a sender and a receiver can have a big influence on the receiver in terms of changing their behavior and attitudes towards products or brands. On that account, WOM can be described as a process of personal influence that has the power to influence opinions of others. Moreover, this influence on perceptions can change judgment, value ratings and the likelihood of purchase. (Sweeney et al., 2008, 345–346)

Mazzarol, Sweeney & Soutar (2007) express that the strength of advocacy and the richness of the message are important elements of WOM influence. WOM has been described as a vivid and novel source of information, where negative WOM points out product criticism, bad experiences, rumors and complaints, and positive WOM points out the positive aspects and good experiences with the product (Andersson 1998).

Moreover, message characteristics have an influence on the reader's judgment; how genuine the message is, how it provokes images or how it gives rise to emotional interest.

### **2.1.2 Electronic word-of-mouth**

After the Internet came to play, researchers realized that WOM could take an electronic form (Buttle, 1998). It became clear that the massive boom of the Internet attracted a lot of consumers to go online and exchange information on products and brands electronically. Hence, the concept of electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) was born; a modified online extension of traditional WOM also referred to as "word-of-mouse", "word-online" and "online word-of-mouth". Furthermore, eWOM is also often associated with user generated content and user generated media. (Henning-Thurau, Gwinner & Walsh, 2004) A commonly used definition of eWOM has taken root from the works of Henning-Thurau et al. (2004, 39):

EWOM refers to any statement based on positive, neutral, or negative experiences made by potential, actual, or former consumers about a product, service, brand, or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the Internet (through web sites, social networks, instant messages, news feeds)

Wang & Rodgers (2011, 214) have an alternative definition for eWOM:

EWOM is any degree or combination of positive, negative, or neutral comments, recommendations, or any statements about companies, brands, products, or services discussed or shared among consumers in digital or electronic formats.

Currently eWOM is said to have the largest influence on purchase decisions (Manafy, 2010). As a new and emerging field of research eWOM reflects the modern world. Web 2.0 has remolded mass communication from a one-way to a two-way communication system. Henning-Thurau et al. (2004) found that although eWOM is less personal than

traditional WOM it is a useful tool for consumers to exchange product information. EWOM is also closely related to the application of user-generated content (UGC), which is a fairly new concept and can be defined as Internet content that is produced and published by everyday consumers. In other words, UGC is media content that is created and circulated by web-users, not media or communications professionals. From this point of view eWOM can be seen as a specific type of UGC about products or companies.

Wang & Rodgers (2011) classify eWOM into two categories based on different platforms of UGC. The first type of eWOM takes place in online feedback systems and consumer review websites, and the other type can be found on electronic discussion boards, online communities, and online social networking sites. On these platforms consumers provide each other with valuable information for product evaluation. They express their opinions about products and services with each other by, for example, writing a product comment after a purchase or rating the product's performance. According to Henning-Thurau et al. (2004, 39) eWOM commonly occurs on online review websites, websites that index reviews, Internet shopping sites or other platforms such as discussion boards, Facebook, Twitter or Youtube.

Kulmala, Mesiranta & Tuominen (2013, 21) point out that the meaning and significance of WOM has increased since it has been generated on the Internet. Undoubtedly, the amount of information that the Internet holds about various brands, retailers and products is enormous. Since traditional WOM usually takes place face-to-face between two or more people, its interaction is much stronger than the one of eWOM. Therefore, since eWOM interaction may occur between several receivers and senders it has weaker tie strength. Yet, eWOM conversations tend to last longer and are also easier to measure than traditional WOM.

### EWOM as part of the purchase decision-making process

Online consumer reviews give diagnostic value to the purchase decision process. Mudambi & Schuff (2010) adapted Kotler and Keller's (2005) purchase decision process into six different stages: need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, purchase and post-purchase evaluation.

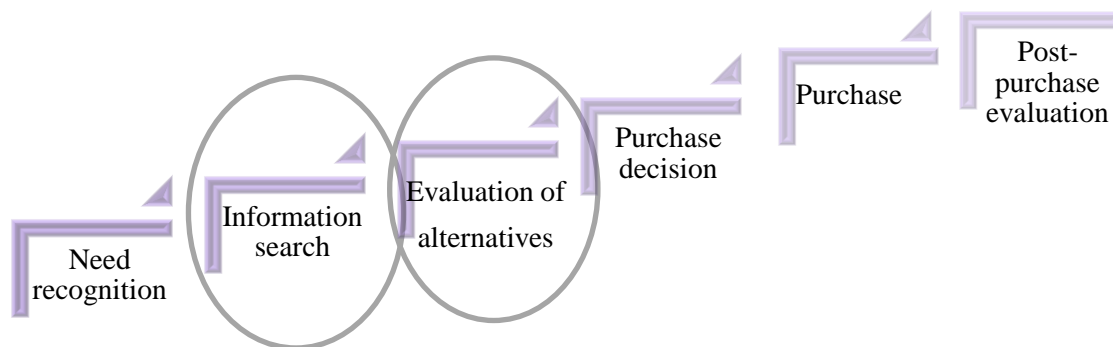


Figure 1. The role of eWOM in the purchase decision process (adapted from Mudambi & Schuff 2010; Kotler & Keller 2005)

The consumer purchase decision process starts in the need recognition stage where the consumer develops a product need by finding a gap between her current state and her desired state. After this need is recognized the consumer starts to look for ways to fulfill her need. To decrease the risk of uncertainty the consumer moves on to the information search stage, where she utilizes product information to increase her awareness and knowledge on her need. The extensivity of information depends on the consumer's current level of knowledge and the perceived value of the information that is available. After gathering the necessary amount of information, the consumer evaluates her alternatives based on product attributes and forms her own opinion on each alternative.

Figure 1 illustrates how eWOM is an essential part of both information search and the evaluation of alternatives. Following the evaluation of alternatives the consumer makes her purchase decision and moves on to either purchasing the best product alternative or



not purchasing any of them. The outcome depends on social values and psychological and economical factors. Lastly, the consumer reaches the post-purchase evaluation stage where she evaluates her purchase (if one was made). The result is either satisfactory or dissatisfactory, depending on her experience with the product. (Kotler, Keller, Brady & Hansen, 2009)

Also Schindler & Bickart (2005, 51) found out that eWOM influences the consumer's decision-process in the sense that information from online consumer reviews may affect the consideration set of a consumer by, for instance, adding alternatives or removing alternatives from it. In other words, online consumer reviews are likely to have an effect on the alternative evaluation stage of a consumer's decision process.

### **2.1.3 Organic and amplified eWOM**

Information delivered personally from a “non-marketer” has been found to be more credible than information provided by marketers (Herr et al. 1991). Word-of-mouth is seen as more trustworthy and credible because it is not generally connected to marketing ambitions (Bickart & Schindler 2001). Moreover, Herr et al. (1991) found that consumers' judgments of products are also heavily influenced by word-of-mouth. For instance, eWOM on online consumer forums has shown to generate more empathy, credibility and relevance than information provided on a corporate websites. (Bickart & Schindler, 2001) On that account, opinions generated by fellow consumers such as personal product experiences are conceived as unbiased and thus do not intend to manipulate consumer thinking.

On that matter, information exchanged between consumers is perceived as more relevant when it is generated through real product experiences. According to previous studies peer opinions are generally more trusted sources of information compared to information provided by marketers and advertisers because they usually have a stronger focus on product attributes (Lee & Youn 2009, 473). On another note, product promises made by marketers are not seen as credible because there is a big chance that they do

not derive from real-world circumstances. (Bickart & Schindler 2001, 32–33) Therefore in the light of the above, online consumer reviews are especially beneficial for their detailed information on usage situations and product benefits that are provided directly by other consumers (Park, Lee & Han, 2007).

EWOM can be divided into two types according to its endogenous or exogenous elements. The Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA, 2011) characterizes eWOM into organic eWOM and amplified eWOM. Organic eWOM takes place when a consumer exchanges experiences about products or brands self-willingly in a natural manner. Thus, interaction has no direct strings to companies or their marketing intentions. Furthermore, organic eWOM is known to be more interactive in terms of discussion. Consumers give and request information more freely by, for example, exchanging advice on using new products or spreading the word about new launches. (Kulmala, Mesiranta & Tuominen, 2013, 21)

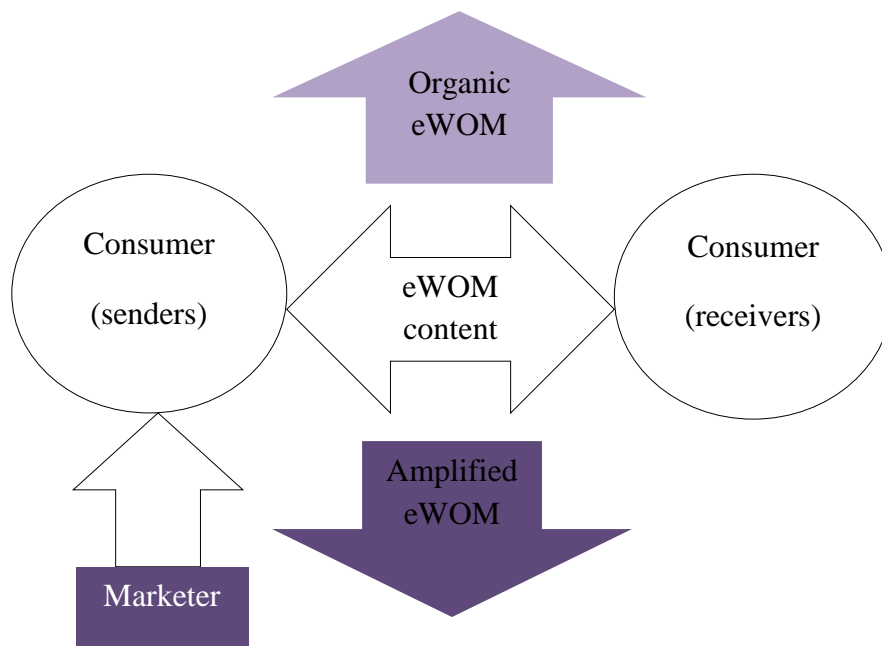


Figure 2. Organic and amplified eWOM (adapted from Kulmala, Mesiranta & Tuominen 2013, 22)

Amplified eWOM on the other hand is more company-initiated. Therefore, it is boosted by marketers who intentionally attempt to raise conversation about a certain product or a brand. (WOMMA, 2011) Situations like these may involve launching a new campaign of some sort or setting up an opinion leader program. Although marketers influence amplified eWOM, in the end the content of eWOM will be produced by consumers who engage in the actual conversations. (Kulmala et al. 2013, 21) Thus, it is important for companies to follow consumer conversations carefully in order to gain perspective on what conversations are most valuable to the company in terms of possible opinion leaders and forerunners for its products. Hence, finding and targeting the best consumer online platforms for promotion can become a big asset for organizations.

Figure 2 illustrates the generation of organic and amplified eWOM from the point of online consumer reviews. Organic eWOM is created by consumers (senders), who share their opinions with other consumers (receivers), and as a result generate eWOM content based on these consumer-to-consumer interrelationships. Alternatively, amplified eWOM is initiated by the marketer and targeted towards consumers, such as opinion leaders, who carry the conversation forward. The phenomenon is similar to organic eWOM in terms of consumers interactively creating the eWOM content, but lacks authenticity and credibility due to the involvement of the marketer. For instance, the subject or direction of the conversation may have been originally fixed and therefore does not naturally derive from consumers themselves. (Kulmala et al. 2013, 21-22)

## **2.2 The concept of credibility**

As there is more and more reliance on the Internet for information, the issue of the credibility or quality of information online raises doubts. Credibility is defined as the believability of information and/or its source. (Metzger, 2007, 2078) It is a multidimensional concept, which is composed of factors such as expertise, trustworthiness, source attractiveness and dynamism. Freeman & Spyridakis (2004)

state that the credibility of a message depends on the receiver's judgment. This judgment is made up of both objective and subjective observations. Objective judgment is influenced by factors such as information quality, and subjective judgment by factors such as attractiveness or expertise. (Freeman & Spyridakis, 2004)

The excessive amount of information that is available and accessible online raises the question of credibility, especially when anyone can write anything with little content supervision or editorial review. Problems such as lack of author identity and universal standards for posting information online may affect credibility negatively, not to mention the fact that information online can be easily modified, misrepresented, plagiarized or created under false pretenses. (Metzger, 2007, 2078)

Inevitably, the Internet has made it necessary to carefully assess information generated online. In the past professional gatekeepers were responsible for the credibility and quality control of information, whereas now the assessment of credibility has moved to the consumers themselves who seek information. Therefore it is important for consumers to know how to evaluate web content in order to assess which information can be considered trustworthy. (Metzger, 2007, 2079)

## **2.3 Online consumer reviews**

EWOM platforms enable interpersonal communication about products and services between consumers. (Lee & Youn, 2009, 473) These online platforms include product review websites, personal blogs, social networking sites, websites owned by brands, message boards and retailer websites (Bickart & Schindler, 2001). Among these many forms of eWOM communication, online consumer reviews have increasingly drawn attention from researchers during the past few years (Zhang, Craciun & Shin, 2010, 1). Furthermore, they are a form of eWOM that has recently grown into a market phenomenon (Chen & Xie, 2008).

Mudambi and Schuff (2010) define online consumer reviews as peer-generated product evaluations posted on company websites or on third party websites. In other words,

online consumer reviews give consumers access to experiences, evaluations and opinions of other consumers that have bought or used a certain product. Consumers are able to post comments online through accounts and evaluate products by, for instance, rating them. (Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003) This new world of consumer-to-consumer communication gives consumers the chance to compare price and quality, exchange opinions about brands, investigate product experiences and give feedback. Online consumer reviews can also be considered as supplements to expert reviews, company automated systems and product descriptions. (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010)

Li & Zhan (2011, 239) say that there are two reasons behind the massive popularity of online consumer reviews. Firstly, it has become more common for consumers to use their usage experiences as a basis of giving advice and opinions to others about products and brands. Such behavior is motivated by the growing need to interact socially, to express concern for others and to increase self-worth. Thus, reviewing and rating products is a regular form of online behavior these days. Secondly, online reviews are popular due to their significant role as helpful sources of information. Based on a survey carried out in 2008, 70 per cent of Americans read product reviews or consumer ratings before making a purchase decision (Ante, 2009). This percentage has most certainly grown since and represents the important role of online consumer reviews today.

On the other hand, Goldsmith & Horowitz (2007) discovered that consumers search for opinions online for eight different reasons: because it is cool, because others do it, to find the best offer, to gather information easily, to reduce their risks, by accident, to get information before a planned purchase or because they are motivated by offline propositions like TV. Moreover, according to Bellman, Lohse & Johnson (1999) demographics alone are not important predictors of online buying. Instead, online product information search is the most important predictor of online buying behavior. In a eWOM setting consumers are typically strangers and anonymous to each other and thus have no prior relationship with each other. This anonymity makes exchanging opinions more comfortable due to hidden identities (Goldsmith & Horowitz 2007). Then again, anonymity weakens the ability to define the credibility and quality of the received information.

Online consumer reviews represent the exchange of consumer information about products and brands. In order to understand how consumers share information, one must acknowledge that this sharing of opinions and experiences takes place on different social platforms. According to Zhang and Watts (2008, 67–68) there are three hierarchical types of online structures where information is shared between consumers. As presented on the bottom of Figure 3, online commonplaces make up the biggest platform for consumer information sharing. This platform allows an easy way to exchange messages via simple technology that merely transfers consumers' messages from recipients to receivers. However, online commonplaces usually lack supportive structures that enhance the building of any social relationships (e.g. Amazon.com), which means that interaction rarely goes beyond information sharing.

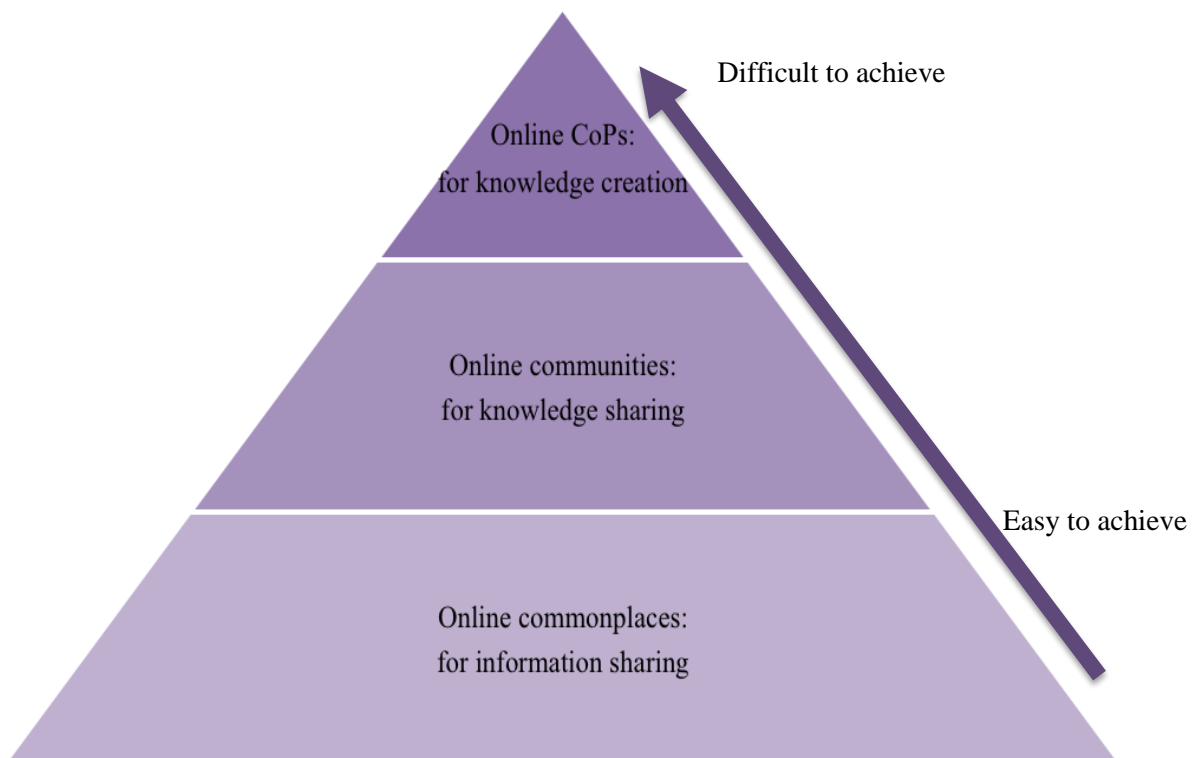


Figure 3. Knowledge sharing in online social platforms (adapted from Zhang and Watts, 2008, 68)

Above online commonplaces are online communities. They can also be described as online commonplaces, but they differ in the sense that they have some additional characteristics. These characteristics are commonly designed to support consumer-to-consumer interaction and provide a tiny degree of identity development. Yet, the level of support for social interaction depends on the website and its technological resources. Nevertheless, online communities allow consumers to get more involved with each other by enabling posting and commenting on discussions, collaborating and giving advice to each other. Furthermore, online communities have been found to also share knowledge as opposed to just sharing information. That being so they enhance member engagement in discussions and communication in terms of the context of the knowledge. (Zhang and Watts, 2008, 68)

Furthest up are the online communities of practice (CoPs). They are also online communities but hold more supportive elements for social interaction than online communities. CoPs not only allow identity development for individuals, but also for the entire community. Moreover, on top of information sharing and knowledge sharing, CoPs support knowledge creation. (Zhang and Watts, 2008, 68) This makes them the most difficult social structure to build and to maintain. In terms of online consumer reviews this platform may have extremely strong eWOM influence, as members of the community are better acquainted with each other and have a stronger sense of trust and credibility.

## **2.4 Exploring eWOM credibility**

There are plenty of theories that are used to study how consumers are influenced by the information they receive. Such theories, amongst many others, include the Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM), the Heuristic Systematic Model (HSM) and Deutsch and Gerrard's Dual-Process theory of normative and informational influence (1995). ELM and HSM resemble each other as theories; they both investigate how different levels of information processing, comprehensive and heuristic, affect persuasive communication.

(Cheung, Luo, Sia & Chen, 2009, 13) The dual-process theory, on the other hand, investigates how different types of factors impact the persuasiveness of information. It is a psychological theory, which states that the persuasiveness of received messages is influenced by both informational and normative factors. It states that it would be insufficient to evaluate content solely by informational elements, since it is strangers that generate eWOM on the Internet. Thus, incorporating normative elements to the evaluation of eWOM complements research suitably.

As the dual-process theory not only focuses on the informational influence, but also concentrates on the normative influence from other audiences, Briggs, Burford, De-Angeli & Lynch (2002) state that the dual-process approach is especially beneficial in explaining the effect of communication in situations that involve group opinions or discussions. On that account, it can be said that it is fitting to apply the Dual-process theory in eWOM research, as eWOM is considered to be an open discussion that consists of multiple partakers.

Furthermore, Mendes-Filho & Tan (2009) describe informational determinants of influence to be based on the content of the received information, and normative determinants of influence to be based on other people's opinions about the received information. Thus, the dual-process theory attempts to recognize how and to what extent informational and normative determinants affect the persuasiveness or reliability of consumer reviews, in other words, how they affect eWOM credibility. According to the theory, informational and normative influences together shape up the receiver's information-credibility judgment. Therefore, both informational and normative determinants can be used to evaluate eWOM credibility.

On the other hand, Schindler & Bickart (2005, 47–48) state that consumers evaluate eWOM credibility also by paying attention to different cues of bias and cues of validity. Both of these cues help consumers to determine which consumer information they perceive credible. All in all, to gain deeper understanding on how consumers evaluate the credibility in online consumer reviews, we need to analyze the different factors they use to evaluate them.



### 2.4.1 Informational determinants

Informational influence emerges from information that is acquired as evidence about reality. The receiver judges the received information through determinants such as the content or the source of the information at hand. For example, the informational influence may be stronger in cases where the presenter of the information is considered to have more authority or knowledge on the subject. On that note, four informational determinants have been used in previous informational influence studies: argument quality, information consistency, source credibility and information framing (Cheung et al. 2009, Wathen & Burkell 2002)

**Argument quality** refers to the strength or quality of the received information. It is the degree to which the receiver sees the argument as well founded and convincing in expressing a certain opinion. Many studies have shown that argument strength clearly affects the attitude of the receiver, especially in virtual environments. Strong arguments create positive attitudes towards the information and thus increase its credibility. On the contrary, invalid arguments found in the received information form negative attitudes towards the information and naturally indicate that it is not credible. Additionally, argument strength has been proven to be essential in evaluating incoming communications. Therefore, it can be said that readers also judge the credibility of eWOM messages according to how strong their arguments are. (Cheung et al. 2009, 15)

Li & Zhan (2011) have identified four dimensions that can be used to evaluate argument quality in terms of how convincing it is. These four dimensions are demonstrated in Table 1. Firstly, in an online context the ability to process information becomes extremely important. Therefore, the ease of comprehension is a critical factor for the reader of an online consumer review. People hardly read online text word by word due to, for instance, an overload of information or lack of time (Redish, 2007).

Also, linguistic research has found that message length and complicated grammatical structures are harder to comprehend which makes them less convincing. When the message lacks clarity and the argument is difficult to understand, the perceived message may not be able to provide the online user with the answer they are trying to obtain.

Moreover, the format of writing can also have an effect on how easily the message will be comprehended. In particular, text that can be quickly and easily scanned by eyes is more persuasive, such as the use of point-format like bullet points, numbered lists, transitional words and separate paragraphs. (Li & Zhan, 2011)

Secondly, in an online setting users are not able to elucidate who is providing the information and therefore assessing source credibility becomes challenging. This is where evidence presence comes to play as an important factor. Evidence presence refers to how well the writer provides evidence to back up their position. This does not mean that the information has to be from a scientific source, but rather that it needs to support the writer's arguments and claims by providing well founded evidence. (Cox and Cox 2001) Thus, it can be said that the use of legitimate quotations increases the argument quality of an online consumer review.

The third dimension, opposing viewpoints, refers to how one-sided or two-sided a message is. Naturally, one-sided messages introduce only one perspective to a matter, whereas two-sided messages cover more than one side of a matter. For instance, a two-sided message may embody both the strengths and the weaknesses of the product that is being reviewed. However, writing a convincing online review depends on how clearly the writer expresses her opinion. If a two-sided message lacks a definite opinion, it may not be as convincing as a one-sided message stating a clear preference. (Li & Zhan, 2011)

The fourth dimension, comprehensiveness, differs from ease of comprehension in the way that it focuses on how sufficient the message is, whereas ease of comprehension focuses more on how understandable the message is to the reader. Previous studies have studied comprehensiveness by subjective user ratings of information comprehensiveness or sufficiency (e.g., Sussman and Siegal, 2003). However, Li & Zhan (2011, 244) evaluate the comprehensiveness of a message by more observable and objective measures, such as the amount of product features it introduces and how long the review is in terms of words.

Table 1. Evaluating argument quality by four dimensions (adapted from Li & Zhan, 2011)

<b>EASE OF COMPREHENSION</b>	Grammatical structure, format of writing
<b>EVIDENCE PRESENCE</b>	Legitimate quotations, claims that support opinions
<b>OPPOSING VIEWPOINTS</b>	One-sided versus two-sided messages
<b>COMPREHENSIVENESS</b>	Number of features, Message length (in words)

**Information framing** refers to the content of the message. In other words, it refers to whether the content of the message is positively or negatively framed. When the content is positively framed, the message brings forth the strong suits of the product emphasizing its strengths like a praise message. When the content is negatively framed the message pinpoints the weak spots of the product drawing more attention to its weaknesses like a complaint message. Former studies have demonstrated that in the case of WOM communications negative framing has stronger influence than positive framing (Cheung et al., 2007). One of the reasons for this is that the probability if the message writer being a marketer or a promoter is small when the message presents negative aspects of the product or brand. Furthermore, it is in the nature of people to avoid risks, so trusting a consumer review for instance might keep a consumer from making a bad purchase decision.

Kanouse & Hanson (1972) state that negative cues attract more attention because we are used to a social environment full of positive cues. In fact, a slight amount of negativity may even increase the credibility of the review. This can be referred to as negative bias, where negative information is more striking than positive information due to its rare nature. (Fiske, 1980) Moreover, it is common for marketers to create marketing campaigns that only spread positive information about their brand and products. Therefore, it is no wonder that consumers tend to question the trustworthiness of this kind of information. It can also be said that positive information has become so ordinary that it is easily taken for granted. For this reason, negative information is seen as more helpful. For example, if a consumer purchases an expensive lipstick and another consumer complains about the bad smell of the same lipstick, this negative opinion will stand out because it is unexpected for an expensive lipstick to actually smell bad.

**Source credibility** is an important indicator of the trustworthiness of the received information. It is described as the ability of a message source to provide accurate, truthful information. Information coming from highly credible sources is more acceptable to people than information provided by a source with low credibility. Therefore, the credibility of the source has an effect on how convincing and how persuasive the message is to the reader. (Li & Zhan, 2011)

Firstly, Hovland & Weiss (1951) found that the credibility of a message is influenced by the attractiveness, familiarity, power and physical appearance of the communicator. Although source credibility can be applied to an online environment where communication is an exchange of textual messages, it is difficult to indicate physical features such as attractiveness (Lim, Sia & Bensabat, 2006). Thus, in eWOM it is more useful to convey the credibility of information by, for instance, the reviewer's reputation in the system. This means that making the decision to trust a source becomes easier when consumers are able to examine the reviewer's previous posts and ratings made by other members. Moreover, the website's administrator may also play a part in granting the reviewer credibility by presenting prior posting records or contributions. Thus, the reviewer's profile is one of the key attributes when evaluating the credibility of messages posted online. (Cheung et al., 2009, 16) From a eWOM viewpoint,

researchers such as Wathen and Burkell (2002) call these physical features “virtual credentials”. Thus, in an online setting source credibility is highly determined by the reviewer’s identity characteristics.

Secondly, previous research has studied source credibility through two dimensions: source expertise and trustworthiness. Source expertise refers to how well the writer of the message is able to provide valid assertions, and trustworthiness to why the writer wants to share this information with others. Source credibility is commonly evaluated by how readers have rated the perceived competence and trustworthiness of a source (e.g., Sussman & Siegal, 2003). Li & Zhan (2011, 241) claim that existing measures for argument quality and source quality cannot be properly used in analyzing online reviews. They prefer to evaluate source credibility by product usage and language intensity.

It is common for consumers to evaluate source credibility through product usage. Product usage refers to the writer’s self-disclosed product-usage experience. For instance, if the writer owns the product that they are reviewing or has used one from a close acquaintance, the credibility of the review rises. Therefore, when the writer of the message is a user herself, the expressed experience is more personal and comes off as information from a reliable source. (Li & Zhan, 2011) Language intensity, on the other hand, is more linked to source trustworthiness. It brings stylistic features of messages into focus by recognizing intense language, such as graphic language or emotion-laden words. More precisely, language intensity can be evaluated by the number of exclamation marks or the presence of powerful positive or negative emotions expressed in the review. Furthermore, intense language that brings forth extreme arguments can affect source credibility negatively. Moreover, extreme positions may lower the perceived source competence of the review due to the expression of too radical views with too intense language. Also, specific adverbs, adjectives and phrases have higher intensity according to old psycholinguistic studies. Language like this may involve words or phrases like “extremely”, “disgusting”, or “don’t care of it”. Also, Vasquez (2012) has found that language that contains constructed dialogue, humor, vivid detail and story prefaces may have an effect on how the reader perceives an eWOM message.

**Information consistency** takes place in situations where advice, such as the one found in online consumer reviews, confirms the reader's prior belief of the product. In other words, information consistency refers to how accordant the message is with the existing product knowledge of the reader. (Zhang & Watts 2003) Previous studies have indicated that the reader of the message considers the received information trustworthy when it is consistent with what they already know about the product. Conversely, if the message disconfirms the reader's previous knowledge, it is less probable that they see it as valid and credible. (Chang et al., 2009)

Furthermore, according to Doherty & Kurz, (1996) and their social judgment theory, information should not be too dissimilar with what the reader of a review already believes because otherwise they will consider the information objectionable and will most likely reject it. In other words, the information should be inside the consumer's latitude of acceptance rather than inside their latitude of rejection. (Doherty & Kurz, 1996)

#### **2.4.2 Normative determinants**

Normative influence arises from opinions and expectations of others. Thus, the choice preferences of a group or a community play a big role in evaluating eWOM credibility. Normative influence takes place in situations where the position of other consumers is provided, such as the majority opinion on a product. Previous studies have utilized two normative determinants: online review consistency and online review rating. (Cheung et al., 2009)

**Review consistency**, also known as recommendation consistency, refers to how consistent the review is with experiences that others have had with the product. The more consistent the message is with other messages, the more credible it is in the eyes of the reader. Especially in an online environment, reviews are submitted by more than one experienced consumer, which enables readers to gather numerous comments for evaluation. (Cheung et al. 2007) Consumers have the chance to access opinions from different users and compare them with each other. For example, if a consumer reads 6

reviews online that all say that the product works poorly, but then reads a review that states that the product works perfectly, she will probably assess the credibility of this last review as low (Zhang & Watts, 2003). This is because it has been shown that people are prone to follow and trust normative opinions. When information deviates from the norms and standards, it can be considered as counter normative.

In light of the above, a consumer is likely to rank the credibility of a review higher when it is homogeneous with what other consumers have expressed. Therefore, consistency between messages has a strong influence on perceived review credibility. On the other hand, inconsistency between reviews will confuse the reader making it more likely for the review to be perceived less credible as a source of information. (Zhang & Watts 2003)

**Online review rating** is another normative determinant that consumers assess in terms of eWOM credibility. It usually refers to overall ratings or scores that have been provided by other consumers who have read the review or used the product in the past. (Cheung, Luo, Sia & Chen, 2007) Situations like these may entail consumers marking an online review high or low according to what perception the message conveyed. The final rating score therefore represents how other readers felt about the online review or the product (for example 5 stars or 1 star). Furthermore, a high rating score implies that majority of readers agree with the review and believe in its content, or agree with the overall opinion on the product. (Cheung et al., 2009) Previous studies have also shown that this rating score may have strong influence on the credibility assessment of the reader (e.g., Price and Hersh, 1999, 911–915) Hence, consensus among opinions is an important element in regard to credibility. Conversely, if the overall score is low the reader is more likely to consider a message that is inconsistent with the mass opinion as less reliable. All in all, normative decision making plays a big role since it is apparent that consumers look to other consumers for advice. (Eysenbach, Powell, Kuss & Sa, 2002)

### 2.4.3 Cues for bias & validity

According to Schindler & Bickart (2005, 47–48) consumers pay attention to two potential problems when evaluating eWOM: cues for bias and cues for validity. Cues for bias refer to biased information that may occur when the writer of the consumer review is not a genuine consumer, or the website's owner filters unfeigned consumer reviews selectively. Whereas, cues for validity refers to message content that only has a little trace of validity or accuracy and thus does not strike the consumer as trustworthy.

There are three **cues of bias** that consumers evaluate while reading consumer reviews online. Schindler and Bickart (2005) carried out 19 depth interviews with consumers who shop frequently online and found out that consumers pay attention to the platform on which consumer comments are posted. Hence, one cue for bias is the owner of the website. The study suggested that when eWOM takes place on a manufacturer's website consumers are likely to question its credibility. On the other hand, websites that were seen as independent, such as Yahoo, gave consumers a higher sense of credibility, as the probability of self-promoting was perceived smaller.

Another cue for bias is the lack of negative information. This cue is also strongly linked to the previous cue of the owner of the website, as consumers feel that independent websites that are not managed by a retailer have more dissenting opinions on products. Moreover, the more online consumer reviews tend to give four star-ratings and applauding reviews, the less they are seen as credible sources of information. Further, the third cue for bias is the lack of authenticity. Consumers tend to trust consumer reviews that are based on authentic first-person experience. For instance, using "I" statements gives a sense of authenticity and thus raises credibility. However, if the consumer review gives the impression that it is too forced or artificial or just lacks veracity, the credibility of the posted comments is called into question. For example, a consumer review that raises suspicion is one that has more hype than substance, like when consumers express themselves in a manner that can almost be considered scripted. (Schindler & Bickart, 2005, 47–48)



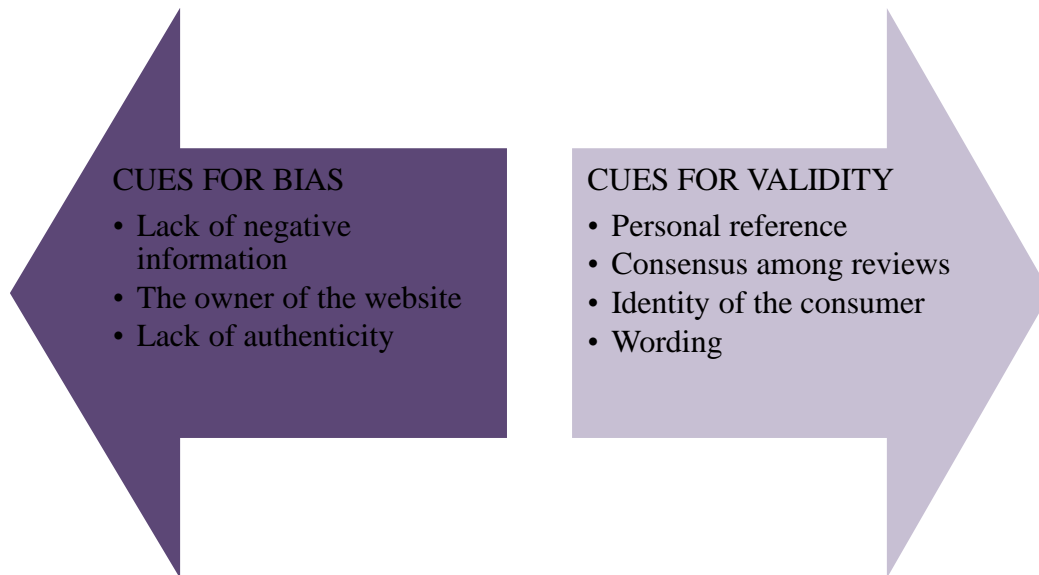


Figure 4. Evaluating eWOM through cues (adapted from Schindler & Bickart (2005, 47–48))

On top of cues for bias, consumers look for **cues for validity** when evaluating the usefulness or credibility of an online consumer review. The more the reviewer backs up their opinion with facts and logic, the more credible it becomes. Strict opinions without any definite details are not considered helpful information. Therefore, consumers look for the presence of personal reference as a cue for validity. The sense of first-person experience is essential in terms of credibility. Consumers especially lean on advice from reviewers who explain how the product performed for them and what it accomplished for them specifically. This naturally provides a more detailed description of the product and its capabilities.

Another cue for validity is the consensus among reviewers. Consumers use consumer opinions to validate other consumer opinions. That being so, consensus plays a big role in terms of credibility evaluation. Consumers do not just trust one consumer, but rather trust the majority of consumers. This means that if the majority of consumers who post reviews agree that the product is either good or bad the information can be trusted. Schindler & Bickart (2005, 47–48) Consensus among reviews is a factor that is closely related to online review consistency mentioned before, which also evaluates message credibility from a majority point of view. The third type of validity cue is the identity of

the consumer who posted the consumer review online. This cue is closely related to the previously covered evaluation of source credibility that involved the reputation or profile of the reviewer. Any information about the writer, such as profession, age or school background can be considered as indication of the identity of the consumer behind the review and whether she or he is a credible source of information. Further, the fourth cue for validity that consumers assess is the wording used in the consumer review. In the case of eWOM, wording plays a significant role. As eWOM occurs in textual form, wording is more detectable than in spoken WOM. Therefore consumers examine and pay more attention to wording. For instance, inexpressive slang or words that indicate emotional reactions like cursory or extremity are not seen as trustworthy. Conversely, wording that conveys familiarity or similarity to the person who wrote the review is considered more credible. (Schindler & Bickart, 2005, 47–48) Thus, this cue is also strongly linked to language intensity, which was discussed under source credibility, where stylistic features of language have an effect on the perceived credibility of a review. Figure 4 illustrates the cues.

#### **2.4.4 Synthesis of the theoretical framework**

The theoretical framework of this study describes how the credibility of online consumer reviews can be evaluated by informational and normative determinants. These different factors are joined together in the synthesis of the theoretical framework and form the foundation for the empirical research. Cues for validity and bias have been integrated into the synthesis as a part of informational and normative determinants. This way the overlapping elements which were found in the literature, between informational and normative determinants and cues for validity and bias, are fused together as one to harmonize similar elements. In the case of cues for bias, lack of negative information is evaluated under framing and the lack of authenticity under source credibility. In the case of cues for validity, personal reference and the identity of the consumer are evaluated as evidence presence under argument quality, consensus among reviews under review consistency, and wording under source credibility.

Table 2. Key supportive theories used in the study

<b>AUTHOR</b>	<b>VIEWPOINT ON EWOM CREDILITY</b>
Schindler & Bickart, 2005	Factors that affect the perceived helpfulness of an online consumer review
Cheung, Luo, Sia, Chen, 2007	Informational and normative based determinants of perceived credibility of online consumer recommendations
Cheung, Luo, Sia & Chen, 2009	Informational and normative determinants of online consumer recommendations
Wathen & Burkell, 2002	Factors influencing credibility on the Web
Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2004	The influence of customer articulations on opinion platforms on decision-making
Metzger , 2007	Models for evaluating online information and recommendations
Li & Zhan, 2011	The effect of content features on the perceived helpfulness of online product reviews

The synthesis is built around the key supportive theories used in this study, which are gathered from previous literature on eWOM credibility. Table 2 presents the theoretical viewpoints that were used to build the basis of the synthesis. The theoretical framework is mainly built on the works of Cheung, Luo, Sia and Chen (2007, 2009) and strengthened with the work of Schindler & Bickart (2005).

The elements illustrated in Figure 5 form an evaluation set that consumers use to help evaluate the credibility of online consumer reviews. The set of determinants is put together to aid in the analysis process of the empirical data. Also amplified eWOM is added to the figure, as it also acts as a factor that is likely to decrease the credibility of an online review.

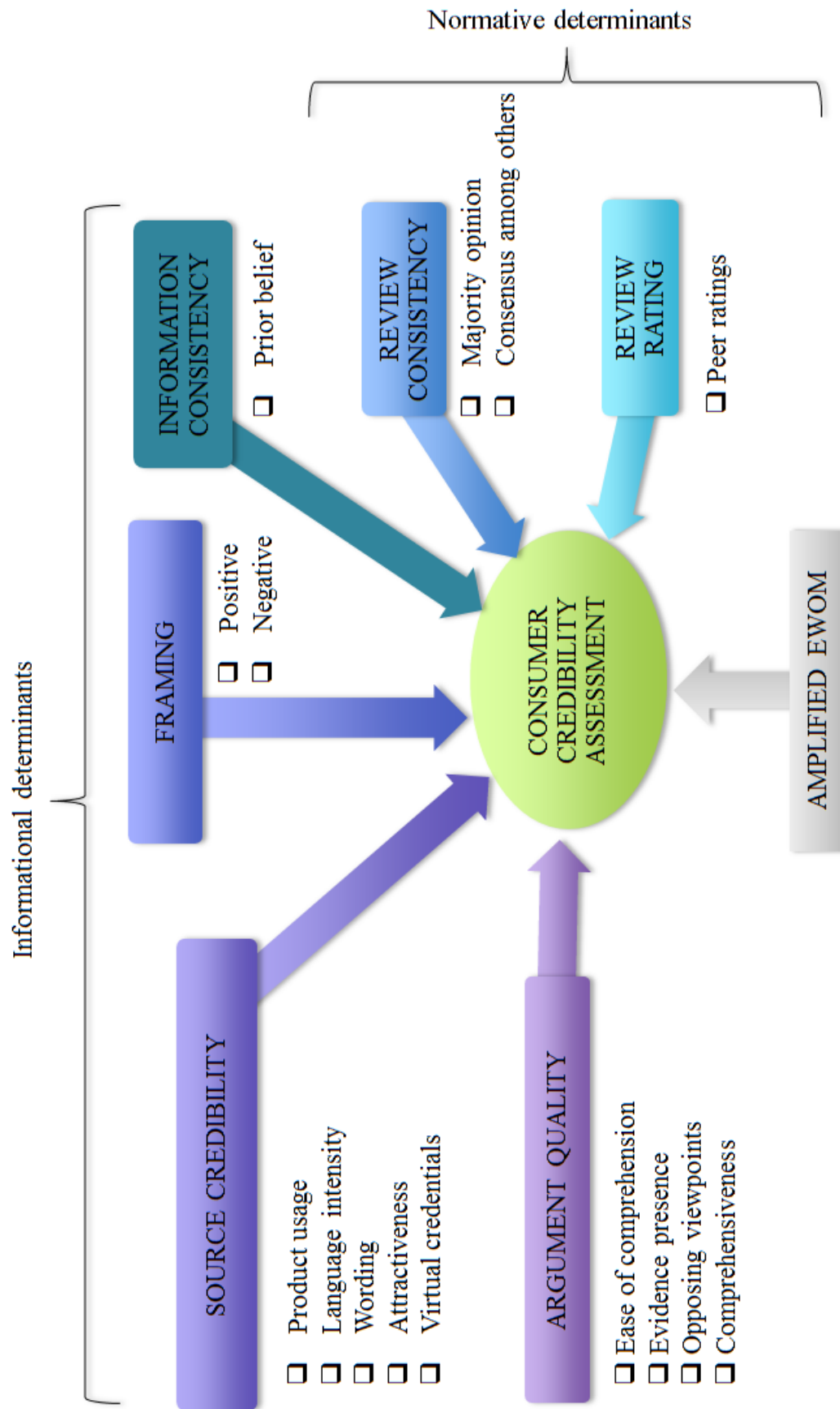


Figure 5. Synthesis of the determinants used to evaluate credibility

### 3 CONDUCTING THE STUDY

#### 3.1 Research strategy

According to Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008, 25), a researcher needs a work plan, which states how to do things and in what order. This plan is expected to contain the basic standpoints of the study, especially in regard to the theoretical framework, as well as the methodological decisions for data generation and analysis. Most importantly, defining a strategy for the research validates the fact that the researcher is qualified to conduct a research (Marshall & Rossman 2006, 58).

Taking the advice of Eskola & Suoranta (1998, 78) a logical canvas has been constructed to help outline the purpose of the study as well as to provide an overview of the objectives. As illustrated in Figure 6, this study is a mixed methods research that describes and analyses how consumers evaluate the credibility of online consumer reviews. It analyses the different determinants that indicate credibility in online consumer reviews from the perspective of Lumene's cosmetics products.

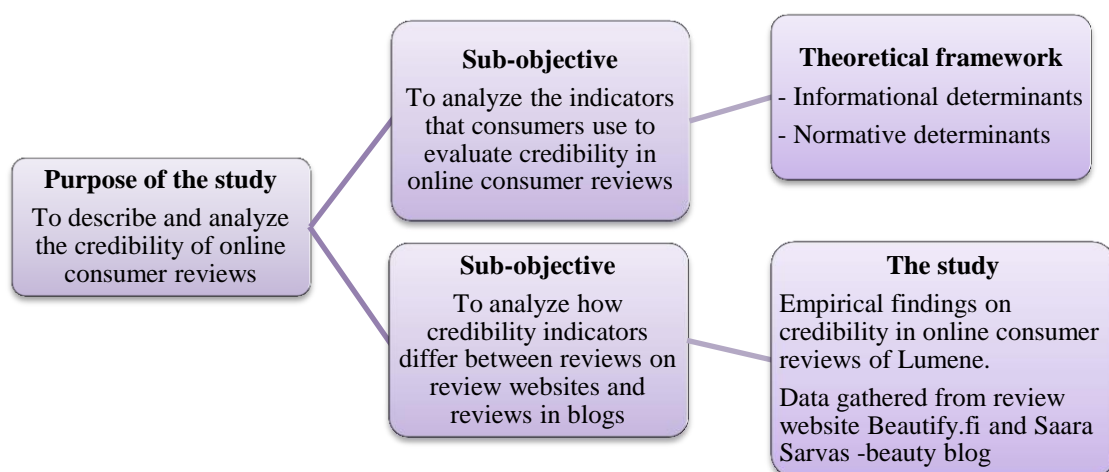


Figure 6. Logical canvas for the study outline

As a process introduced by Dubois & Gadde (2002) this study uses systematic combining where empirical data, theoretical framework and the case study analysis progress concurrently. In fact, empirical data and theory are developed in synergy, where empirical data directs the analysis one way and theory another way. In the end, a study is formed where both aspects come together and structure the study fittingly. Figure 7 illustrates this intertwined and inductive research process. As stated by Gummesson (2000, 70) understanding on the study topic increases step by step as the research evolves.

In this study, the process began with choosing the research subject according to preliminary interest in the study subject. The researcher was especially interested in eWOM and the beauty market, particularly in cosmetics products.

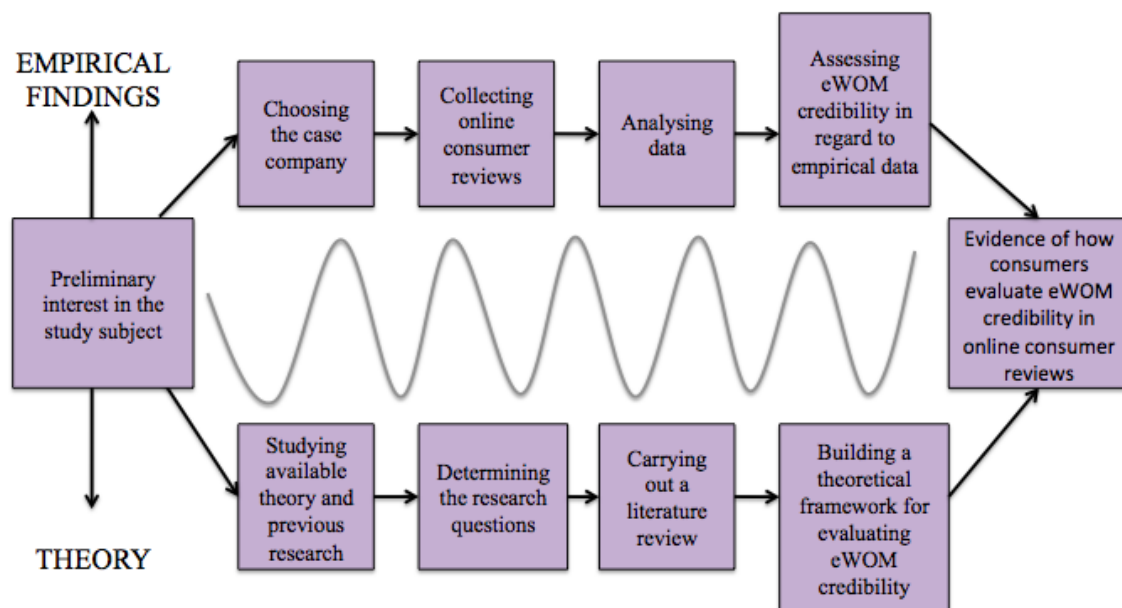


Figure 7. The research process of the study (adapted from Penttilä, 2010, 33; Gummesson, 2000, 70)

The choice of the case company was made during the process of studying available theory and previous research on eWOM. Online consumer reviews as a form of eWOM were taken under stronger consideration. This resulted in browsing various discussions and consumer comments in online portals, which then led to the choice of empirical data. Online consumer reviews on Lumene's products were considered most interesting and suitable as empirical data for the study.

The process continued to collecting online consumer reviews from a review website called Beautify.fi and discussion threads from the blog of Saara Sarvas on Lily.fi. As the researcher observed the available empirical data, an interesting concept surfaced which was the credibility of online consumer reviews. This observation guided in determining the research questions of the study. From here the study progressed into analyzing the data along with carrying out a literature review on eWOM credibility and online consumer reviews. The process went on to assessing the empirical data in regards to eWOM credibility characteristics. However, this process was intertwined with the building of a theoretical framework for eWOM credibility. The process ends in interpreting the findings and drawing conclusions on the credibility of Lumene's online reviews from the perspective of both the review website and the blog.

## **3.2 Case Lumene**

### **3.2.1 The role of consumer information in the beauty market**

In the words of Langmeyer & Shank (1994, 27): "Beauty is an effective sell". The global beauty market, also known as *cosmetics and toiletries* or *personal care products*, is a fascinating area of global consumption that is constantly under various economic, social and cultural transformations. During the last 20 years, the global beauty market has grown by almost 5 per cent a year on average. Its annual growth rates range from 3 per cent to 6 per cent. Moreover, the beauty market continues to thrive even in the gloomiest economic conditions and has shown the world its true capacity for flexibility. (Lopaciuk & Loboda, 2013)

The beauty market is typically comprised of five business segments. These include skincare, fragrances, hair care, color (make-up) and toiletries. All segments complement each other and are extremely diverse, thus satisfying all kinds of consumer needs and expectations in terms of cosmetics. Additionally, beauty products are commonly further divided into premium and mass production segments depending on price, prestige and distribution. In 2010, the mass production segment covered 72 per cent of total sales, whereas the premium segment covered the remaining 28 per cent. Global premium markets are highly concentrated in the developed markets; United States, France and Japan being the biggest premium markets in the world (Barbalova, 2011).

Just like in other markets, the Internet has had a powerful influence on the beauty market. E-commerce outlets selling beauty products, price comparison engines and product information portals are now spread all over the web. Consumer-to-consumer interaction has never been so high and electronic word-of-mouth on all aspects of beauty is found in various different virtual platforms. Most cosmetics companies have yet to understand the opportunities of eWOM. Companies like L'Oréal, P&G and Unilever are only now recognizing the need to use conversation, content and community as cornerstones of engagement.

According to Richard Stacy: "Conversations should be about what people want to speak to you about in places and spaces where they want to be". (Cosmeticsbusiness) Moreover, the beauty market is constantly in motion with new trends emerging the market one after another. "There is a transformer trend, where consumers expect products to have more than one function, either to save money or time. It is also about experimentation with different textures, morphing textures that change from one state to another", says Hinako Sugioka, senior consultant of Mintel Beauty Innovation. (Cosmeticsbusiness)

Cosmetics products are rarely easy or simple items to purchase. They are extremely personal and normally need a longer purchase decision process. For instance, buying cosmetics online may turn out quite challenging, as consumers are not able to



completely match up their skin color to the foundation or smell the new perfume virtually. (Watkins, 2013) Even when given the possibility to physically try a cosmetic in a store, picking the right product may require more information to support the purchase decision. In addition, special effects and Photoshop enhancements, which are more than usual in advertising, raise consumer skepticism – is what I see really what I get? As a result, today's consumers like to read about a beauty product to understand it before buying it and to know that it lives up to its claims. According to Mintel's 2012 social media research report on beauty and personal care products, 34 per cent of potential buyers use social media websites to research beauty products before buying them. Furthermore, one in three consumers share opinions and thoughts on social networking sites about beauty brands that they have previously used.

The exchange of information between consumers on the Internet is an essential part of the purchase decision process; this also applies to purchase decisions regarding beauty products. Consumers demand more and more inventive technologies, ingredients and products in the beauty industry, as they grow more aware of their alternatives. Consumers know what they want and want to buy a beauty product that best fulfills their need to look and feel good. Thus, online consumer reviews play a major role in the beauty industry as a helpful tool for consumers to research beauty products. Also, bloggers' opinions can also be considered one form of a consumer review, as bloggers usually test beauty products on themselves. Blogs give the sense of a real person, unphotoshopped and relatable. Furthermore, pre-existing followers commonly trust bloggers' opinions and make purchase decisions according to their tips and advice (Watkins, 2013).

### **3.2.2 Conducting the case study**

Classic case study research is methodologically connected to ethnographic, interpretive and field-research traditions (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991, 613). Yin (2013) defines a case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context. Therefore, it aims to learn how a specific and unique case works. It can

be said that the uniqueness of the case is what makes the case study approach appropriate.

Since eWOM research on beauty products is non-existent, this study provides a unique case description of the study subject (Gummesson, 2007). It is important to note that this study is an extensive case study. Therefore, it does not focus on individuals as such, but rather focuses on studying the issue by using several individuals as instruments in the study. This means that the researcher collects empirical data on the case in order to analyze the issue in a new real-life context. Thus, this study helps to crystallize and explain how consumers are able to evaluate the credibility of online consumer reviews in the beauty business context. (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008, 115)

In addition, it is important that the research method allows change. Gummesson (2007) claims that the research method needs to be open for possible complexity or else it will not contribute to either theory or practice. Case study can be described as the study of complexity, context, ambiguity and chaos. It allows the researcher to choose freely regarding data generation and the use of analytical techniques. Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008, 115) even say that a case study should be seen more as a research approach or strategy rather than a method. On that account, case study research has the ability to respond to complexity by providing rich and thick descriptions. (Geertz, 1973) It is important to be critical to the data, especially when the answers and comments of consumers online can be biased (either deliberately or not), and therefore cannot be fully trusted. Case study research makes the meanings clear by providing an interpretation through thick descriptions (Shank, 2002, 7476).

This study is conducted as a case study on Lumene – a Finnish market leading skincare and cosmetics brand. The company was founded in 1948 and its net sales were 90 million euros in 2013. Half of Lumene's net sales come from its home market, Finland. The other half is generated from international markets such as Russia, USA and Scandinavia. Lumene's success lies in its ability to create bioactive skincare and cosmetics products from naturally effective ingredients. For instance, Lumene is the first company to utilize Arctic berries in cosmetics. Furthermore, the skill to combine

arctic nature and scientific expertise is one of the brand's key strengths. (Lumene, 2015)

As information seeking on beauty products has become a regular phenomenon, studying online reviews written on beauty products is an interesting study subject. Lumene's products were chosen as a convenient case because of the researcher's prior knowledge of the Finnish beauty market. Therefore, gathering data generated by Finnish consumers on a Finnish cosmetics brand seemed most appropriate. Moreover, online consumer reviews on Lumene's products provide rich descriptions, which offer fruitful empirical data for analysis.

### **3.3 Mixed methods approach**

Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008, 27) emphasize the importance of choosing the research method accordingly, as the research method is primarily expected to assist in finding answers to the research objectives. Combining both qualitative and quantitative research has become more common in today's research. (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2009) In fact, the mixed methods approach has lately emerged in different research areas, where it has been used to improve the research process and study findings. Morse (2003, 190) defines mixed methods design as below:

*It is a corporation of various qualitative and quantitative strategies within a single project that may have either a qualitative and quantitative theoretical drive. The "imported" strategies are supplemental to the major or core method and serve to enlighten or provide clues that are followed up within the core method.*

According to Van Maanen (1983) qualitative and quantitative methods should not be seen as opposites. As a matter of fact, when they are combined they bring testability and context into the research (Kaplan and Duchon 1988). A researcher is able to answer his research questions in the most effective way, when she is able to use both approaches flexibly. Furthermore, the approach may provide more coverage and a broader picture on the study subject than what would have been achieved otherwise (Bonoma 1985).

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2009) believe that despite the approach or design of the research, most data collection techniques have the potential to generate both qualitative and quantitative data that can be analyzed either qualitatively or quantitatively.

Figure 8 illustrates the strengths and weaknesses of the mixed methods approach as stated by Drew, Hardman & Hosp (2008). Firstly, a limitation of the approach is the fact that it requires adequate understanding of multiple methodologies. Furthermore, translating and integrating both types of data may be challenging. Secondly, determining which element of the quantitative results to pursue with qualitative data, or which element of the qualitative results to pursue with quantitative data may be challenging. As for the strengths, the approach has the advantage of gaining the best of both worlds by capitalizing on the strengths of more than one method. In addition, quantitative data may offer a chance to further explore primary qualitative results, or vice versa, qualitative data may offer a chance to help explain or elaborate on quantitative results.

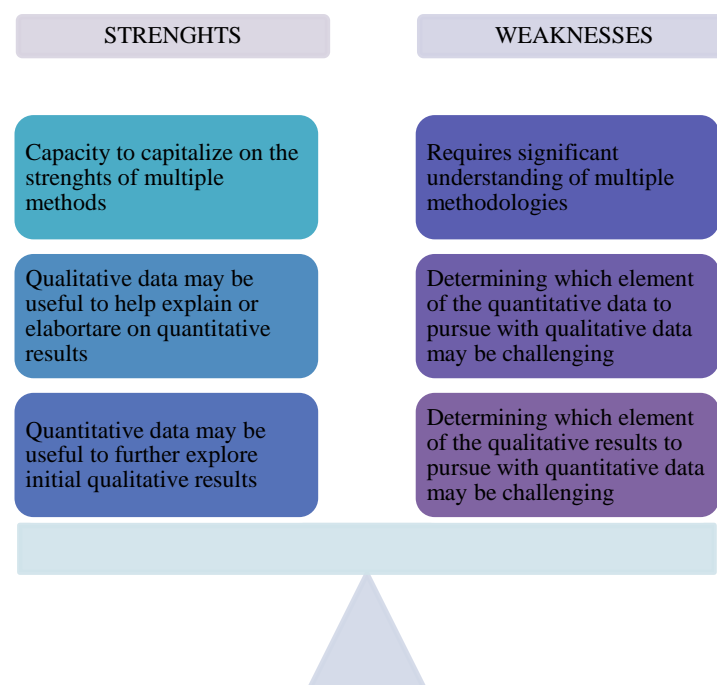


Figure 8. Strengths and weaknesses of mixed methods approach

Undoubtedly, mixed methods research takes more time than using a single methodology. Nevertheless, the benefits of the approach may turn out to be worth the additional time. Moreover, mixed methods designs can work as a synthesis of more than one approach, so that the strengths of one method may compensate the limitations of the other. It is important to note that when two approaches are used to answer the research questions, the mixed methods study can be equally qualitative and quantitative or primarily qualitative or quantitative. (Drew, Hardman & Hosp, 2008) For instance, this study is a primarily qualitative netnographic research, but it is supported by qualitative content analysis which helps the study further explore the initial qualitative results with some quantitative elements.

### **3.3.1 Qualitative research approach**

Qualitative research is consists of data collection, analysis and interpretation all occurring concurrently. (Gummesson (2005, 309–312) When conducting qualitative research, marketing researchers are advised to design an individual research approach that best matches their persona. Qualitative research aims to gain a holistic understanding of the subject in hand. In other words, qualitative research focuses on describing and studying the matter of interest thoroughly by gaining deeper understanding on a certain phenomenon. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 5). Ghauri & Gronhaug (2005, 202) state that:

*Qualitative research is particularly relevant when prior insights about a phenomenon under scrutiny are modest, implying that qualitative research tends to be exploratory and flexible because of ‘unstructured’ problems (due to modest insights).*

Therefore, qualitative research is especially useful in situations where the researcher hopes to gather more understanding on the human aspects of specified unique cases

(Berg 2004, 7). A strong characteristic of qualitative research is the collection of data in real-life situations. Nevertheless, the objective of the research is not to test various hypotheses, but to rather look at the data comprehensively from many different angles. Furthermore, Gummesson (2005, 312) states that qualitative methodology strives to puzzle out the complex in a systematic perspective. He expresses that life cannot be broken down into clear integral components since reality is affected by synergies and thus should not be seen as merely the sum of constituents.

Moreover, qualitative research does not normally follow a strictly constructed path. It is common for qualitative research designs to give room for possible discrepancies and surprises along the way, especially when it comes to data collection and analysis. Changes during the research process can therefore be anticipated. This however does not rule out the importance of planning some key elements for the research process ahead of time. (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2008, 4–9). In addition, when it comes to qualitative research, one must understand the process as a reflective one, where the researcher plays an integral role from beginning to the end. More precisely, researcher involvement in the process cannot be ruled out.

### **3.3.2 Netnography as a research method**

This study uses netnography as its primary research method for the following reasons. Firstly, netnography, also known as digital ethnography or virtual ethnography, is a qualitative research method that is principally applied to a computer-mediated environment. It is an anthropological method, which has become popular especially in cultural studies, consumer research and sociology. According to Kozinets (2002, 64) netnography is a new qualitative research methodology based primarily on the observation of textual discourse. It allows the observation of naturally occurring texts and data, especially when the surroundings of the study phenomena are not a simulation created by the researcher (Kulmala, Mesiranta and Tuominen 2012, 23). As the study analyses the credibility of online consumer reviews that are found in an online environment and are in the form of textual discourse, netnography suits the purpose more than well.

Secondly, netnography resolves around a limited research object and is especially beneficial in cases where the aim is to gather more insight on consumer needs, wants, choices and symbolic meanings in a virtual context. Although, the utilization of netnography in market research and analysis is still to a large extent undeveloped, it is an appropriate choice for this research as it is inherently flexible and can be adapted to the skill set and interests of the marketing researcher. (Eriksson & Kovalainen (2008, 27) Hence, netnography is an adequate choice, seeing that the purpose of the study is to gain a holistic understanding of the credibility of online consumer reviews. Although the phenomenon of online consumer reviews goes beyond textual discourse, this study focuses on analyzing the determinants that consumers use to evaluate eWOM messages. Therefore, the study utilizes evidence from previous studies on eWOM credibility and analyses these determinants in a new setting.

In the light of the above, it is relevant to state the benefits netnography provides to marketers as a research method. Xun & Reynolds (2010, 19) list five strengths that can also been seen as beneficial to this study:

- *Wide accessibility* – online environments are open and anonymous, which makes the recruitment of respondents easier and more extensive. Gathering the necessary amount of data for this study was easy and did not take up any additional expenses, as data could be retrieved from an online environment.
- *Continuity in research* – Maintaining contact with respondents for a longer period of time becomes possible when, for example, the whereabouts of the respondent do not limit research. Since the data of this study exists online, there is continuity in the sense that the location of the respondents is insignificant.
- *Economically practical and timesaving* – As netnography takes place on the Internet, it is usually cost-free and feasible. Thus, it eliminates the presence of physical fieldwork and travel expenses, which were also bypassed in this study.

- *Observation flexibility and analysis* – Digital footprints enable transcribed data to be archived and stored. Researchers benefit from the permanent documentation of information and can gather data on an ongoing basis. The online consumer reviews were archived for this study, which made it easy to double-check or retrieve additional data when needed.
- *Better quality of online discourse* – When direct quotes from online respondents are available data can be more reflective than, for example, statements gathered from face-to-face interviews. Thus, the online discourse used as data in this study can be considered a strength, since consumers express their opinions in a deeper, more thoughtful way.

On the other hand, a young research method such as netnography has its weaknesses, which need to be taken into consideration just as much as its strengths. Xun & Reynolds (2010, 19–20) point out five potential stumbling blocks that a marketing researcher may encounter:

- *Respondent authenticity and instability of the user base* – Determining the identity of a member online may be challenging. Pseudonyms and avatars raise concern about authenticity and user bases are often hazy and uncertain research environments.
- *An underdeveloped analytical toolkit* – Netnography lacks well-established analytical tools and thus uses whatever software is available in the market. Researchers have previously leaned on modifying traditional methods, such as online critical discourse analysis or online questionnaires.
- *Poor quality of textual discourse* – The risk of inaccurate flow and order of discussion is an unwelcome fault. Discourse electronically limits the communication of written cues, and the researcher may be required to identify the sequence of the discussion messages and arrange them logically.



- *Ethical sensitivity* – There is a thin line between private and public online information. Anonymity may offer some sense of protection, however, it is argued whether consent for research on the Internet is required or not. From a legal perspective it is the informant's responsibility to decide whether they generate information publicly or not.
- *Generalization* – Netnography typically focuses on one or a few subjects. That being the case, determining the extent to which generalization is possible becomes questionable.

### 3.3.3 Content analysis

The content analysis method may be used in both qualitative and quantitative studies (Neuendorf, 2002). Qualitative content analysis can be described as similar to textual analysis, as it is mainly interpretive and seldom uses statistics for data analysis. On the other hand, quantitative content analysis is a research technique that is utilized to make valid and reliable conclusions from the data to their context. (Krippendorff, 1980)

Content analysis has been used in the field of traditional communication and in studies of human computer interaction, such as research on cultural values, behavior and online applications. It a research method, that can be a useful tool in gaining a deeper understanding on user's preferences and behaviors, especially communicational patterns. Yet, using content analysis with online-based material may involve quite a few challenges in terms of sampling and coding. When different kinds of media characteristics mix within online content, generalizability becomes a big question mark. (Inhwa & Kuljis, 2010)

According to Krippendorff (1980) content analysis has advantages such as being context sensitive which enables it to manage a large quantity of data. It studies the artifact of communication itself and not the individual directly by examining things such as texts and images. Moreover, the method is simple and inexpensive if comparing to some other methods. When data is available online, the researcher is able to reach user generated content without any required engagement. (Holsti, 1969)

Nevertheless, content analysis has its limitations. Firstly, content analysis alone cannot provide adequate answers, as they may easily be considered speculative (Holsti, 1969). Therefore, it is advised to use another method to strengthen the research to ensure credibility. Secondly, Bryman (2007) states that content analysis is sometimes considered lacking in terms of a theoretical basis when there is more focus on measurable factors than what is really important. Thus, it is especially essential for the research design to pay attention to whether there is an association with frequency of occurrence.

Lastly, frequently changing and evolving online content may prove to be a challenge to researchers who collect it. Furthermore, today's mixed multiple media generates content that is complex and full of different features, such as animations, audio, graphics, texts and hyperlinks. To avoid problems caused by changes in website content, it is advised to collect data quickly and download or archive it elsewhere for analysis. (Inhwa & Kuljis, 2010)

This study uses content analysis to help analyze the occurrence and frequency of the different informational determinants that were found in the empirical data. A total of 292 consumer reviews were collected during three months (February 2014 to April 2014). 161 online consumer reviews were collected and archived from Beautify.fi and 131 online consumer reviews were collected from the blog of Saara Sarvas. To ensure validity, similar factors reported in past literature were used to assess frequency and to link the content analysis to theoretical foundations.

Some online consumer reviews provided indications of many credibility determinants; however, some reviews did not provide them at all. During analysis, each review was analyzed separately and notes were made on the factors that could be identified as indications of credibility. Also other observations were put down in notes in regard to each message and the overall data. For instance, during the analysis of consumer reviews from the blog's comment field, an observation was made that some of the messages had strong positive opinions on Lumene as a brand, which came off as

slightly too praising. This observation was noted and later analyzed as a sign of amplified eWOM.

Making notes throughout the entire research process helped the researcher to gain a better picture of the study data and assisted in returning back to previous remarks that affected the research. After going through every online consumer message and distinguishing the different determinants they contain, the messages were recorded in an Excel table. This table was used to explore the occurrence of informational determinants in both data groups as a percentage analysis. Later, these percentages were compared to each other to see if there were differences between online consumer reviews written on review websites and reviews written on blog comment fields.

### **3.4 Collecting online consumer reviews**

Kozinets (2002, 63) states that researchers who use netnography benefit from using automated transcriptions of downloaded documents. Collecting data is simple and less costly, and gathering a great amount of data is easier than for example compared to traditional ethnography. When collecting data, it is extremely important for the researcher to choose wisely in terms of which data to save and which data to pursue. This choice should be led by the research questions and the information that is available. Hence, a common problem for netnographers is the potential information overload.

Some researchers like to keep a precise count of the messages, websites and participants. This particularity in netnography is one of its backbones, as it can merely study one specific case in depth. Therefore, even a small amount of messages can generate fruitful and important conclusions. This of course requires messages to have descriptive richness so that the researcher is capable of interpreting in an insightful and analytical manner. (Kozinets, 2002, 64)

Since the online environment is made up of casual and social elements, online messages may be primarily evaluated as being on-topic or off-topic, and social or informational, depending on the research questions of the study. At first a researcher may include all the data in the analysis, but typically will use most of her analytical efforts for the primarily informational and on-topic messages. (Kozinets, 2002, 64)

In this study the data is collected in the form of recorded, transcribed materials that were generated from carefully chosen websites that provide online consumer reviews explaining post-use experiences. The study utilizes textual data, such as posted online consumer reviews and comments, but also visual elements such as photos. Only online reviews written by consumers are taken into consideration. Furthermore, the study is limited to online consumer reviews written on products of Lumene. As there is a large variety of different Lumene cosmetics products on the market, this study handpicked some of the most fruitful and most commented review threads. Also, in order to gather as many reviews on the same products and allow review comparison, only products with the most reviews were chosen as data.

Online consumer reviews were collected from two different local websites. Both websites were found to be relevant to the study, as they showcase Lumene's products and contain online reviews written by Finnish consumers. Although consumer reviews on Lumene can also be found on international websites, this study preferred to use Finnish sources, as Lumene has its biggest customer base in Finland (Lumene, 2015).

### **Online consumer reviews on a review website**

The first source of data is a review website called Beautify.fi. Beautify is a Finnish beauty review platform where consumers are able to read consumer reviews and share personal experiences on cosmetics products. This platform offers suitable study data for this research for two reasons. Firstly, the website was founded based on a rising consumer need; the need to find trustworthy and current information on beauty products from one place. The quintessential idea was that consumers are offered product reviews, information about new product launches and other cosmetic information through one

channel. Secondly, as a still relatively young website Beautify is the first Finnish cosmetics media platform that provides an easy way to access reliable consumer information in one place. Its main goal is to be Finland's most informative cosmetics website and the cosmetics community's best friend.

Thirdly, Beautify has a wide user base, which consists of users who continually return to review and read about new products. Many of the posting consumers on the platform are frequent users who have a great passion for cosmetics. Beautify describes its users as consumers who have a constant thirst for new information on beauty and are interested in being part of the conversation. Moreover, the website has been developed according to consumer feedback and suggestions. Beautify motivates its users to take part in the development process by, for instance, organizing contests where users are awarded with beauty products. On the other hand, Beautify also offers possibilities for companies to cooperate by providing accurate products information about products that are discussed among consumers. Therefore, the possibility of marketing ambitions must be taken into consideration. (Beautify.fi, 2015)

### **Online consumer reviews in a blog**

A blog is a special webpage on which an individual author, the blogger, or a group of collaborating authors systematically publish entries or posts (Li & Chen, 2009). Blogs are a remarkable form of social media on the Internet today giving bloggers the opportunity to interact with users freely by sharing general information, personal details, experiences and knowledge on products. Moreover, blogs offer an open forum to all users, where anyone can write or read a post and contribute to the content published on the blog. (Winster, 2010, 314–317) They are online communities that can also be described as online commonplaces, but they differ in the sense that they have some additional characteristics. These characteristics are commonly designed to support consumer-to-consumer interaction and provide a tiny degree of identity development. Yet, the level of support for social interaction depends on the website and its technological resources. Nevertheless, online communities allow consumers to get more involved with each other by enabling posting and commenting on discussions,

collaborating and giving advice to each other. Furthermore, online communities have been found to also share knowledge as opposed to just sharing information. That being so they enhance member engagement in discussions and communication in terms of the context of the knowledge. (Zhang and Watts, 2008, 68)

At first blogs used to resemble simple online personal diaries that only published one-way material. Since time has passed they have developed into forums that engage people in collaborative activity knowledge sharing, reflection and debate. (Williams & Jacobs, 2004, 232–247) Today's interactive online environment, where user-generated content blossoms, has made blogs into two-way communication platforms where not only the blogger has a voice, but consumers can also share their opinions and experiences with the blogger and with each other. The comment field of a blog can therefore be considered a common exchange channel of consumer reviews and is therefore included in this study as an adequate source of data.

Therefore, the second source of data is a Finnish beauty blog by Saara Sarvas. The blog focuses on beauty products and has reviewed a fair amount of Lumene's products. Furthermore, the blog has a significant amount of messages posted on the comment field and these comments were collected as online consumer reviews for the empirical data. The blog is operated by a blog website named Lily.fi which is an online community that belongs to the women's magazine Trendi. It is an open platform for blogs where content is produced by bloggers in cooperation with the community and the editorial staff. (Lily.fi, 2015) Therefore the possibility of marketing ambitions also exists for data collected from the blog.

### **3.5 Ensuring the quality of the study**

Guba and Lincoln (1994) state that qualitative research should not be evaluated by reliability or validity because they were originally designed for quantitative research. Instead they say that the quality of the study should be evaluated by its trustworthiness,

which they further divide into four sub-criteria: conformability, transferability, dependability and credibility.

In terms of **dependability**, this study offers a logical, traceable and documented process of research, and can therefore be considered trustworthy. In terms of **transferability**, this study shows a clear link to previous research that is similar to what has been studied before. Moreover, the study especially utilizes prior research as a means of exploring the empirical data in this study. In terms of **credibility**, the researcher of this study is familiar with the topic and has previous knowledge on the beauty industry and its consumer base. In addition, the empirical data is sufficient for exploring the topic, however it has its limitations especially in regard to exploring information consistency that cannot be analyzed based on the gathered data. The study shows credibility also by making logical links between observations that another researcher would find compliant if a similar research was conducted on basis of the same data. In terms of **conformability**, the data and interpretations of this study are not just imaginary. Furthermore, others are able to easily understand the links between findings and interpretations.

Seale (1999) on the other hand says that such criteriology like the one stated above is non-productive and qualitative research should rather be seen as a craft skill where the most important instrument is the researcher. This means that the analysis and interpretation of the study depends strongly on the researcher's intuition. Therefore, this study also follows the advice of Gummesson (2005, 313) on conducting a rigorous and systematic research that utilizes human aspects such as intuition, experience, common sense and insights. Although intuition does not count as science per se, it is useful when a researcher needs to process and synthesize data quickly. Good intuition also helps in drawing conclusions from a big amount of data and pulling out the essentials. It is safe to say, that the researcher of this study has an adequate amount of experience and insight on cosmetics and their consumer usage, which in itself shows trustworthiness. Nevertheless, the researcher has to acknowledge the possibility of bias that may come with intuition.

Furthermore, a researcher must acknowledge that an excessive amount of data gathered during a long time period does not always count as high quality. As a matter of fact, a research should not take too long – no more than six months. The quality of a research project will not go up forever, but will actually decline along with its productivity. (Gummesson, 2007, 232) This study gathered data during three months and kept the amount of data at a moderate level by drawing the amount of collected online consumer reviews to 292 units.

The data analysis in this study is problematic in the sense that consumer-to-consumer interaction is anonymous and the identities of reviewers are difficult to examine. Also the study data is challenging due to linguistic features that may vary significantly between different online reviews. The research also requires additional specificity, as the study data consists of reviews written by Finnish consumers, whereas the study is written in English. Therefore, translating consumer messages from Finnish to English calls for extra accuracy, in order to maintain the rightfulness of the data. Another challenge is the fact that blogs and forums are very much composed of anonymous postings that may either be malicious or made under false pretenses.

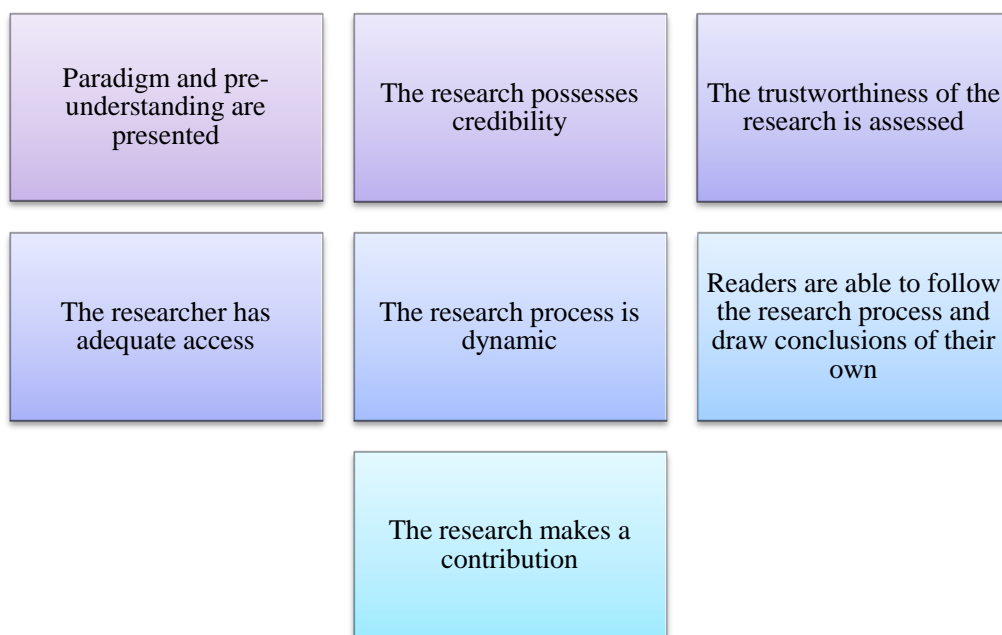


Figure 9. Checklist for quality assurance of the case study



This study used Gummesson's (2000) checklist for quality assurance of case study research to ensure it met the basic quality requirements (illustrated in figure 9). This research meets all the quality requirements expect for one.

Firstly, the research presents paradigm and pre-understanding on the study subject by having prior knowledge of the beauty industry and eWOM. Secondly, the research possesses credibility, especially by assessing the trustworthiness of the research. In his checklist Gummesson talks about assessing the generality and validity of the research, however this study assessed trustworthiness instead, as recommended by Guba and Lincoln (1994).

Thirdly, the researcher of the study had easy access to the study data due to its virtual form. Fourthly, the research process can be considered dynamic as explained during the introduction of the research process. Fifthly, the research follows a common order that the reader is able to follow well. The study also enables readers to draw their own conclusions. Unfortunately, it cannot be said that the study makes a contribution. It utilizes prior theory and adapts it in a new setting. Therefore, no new theory is generated, but rather concrete implications that may be useful to marketers looking for ways to aid consumers seeking information on cosmetics products.

## **4 EVALUATING THE CREDIBILITY OF CONSUMER REVIEWS**

Metzger (2007) describes credibility as the believability of the information and the source of the information. Furthermore, credibility is closely related to trust which people use to deal with complexity in situations that are uncertain. (Grabner-Kräuter & Kaluscha, 2003) More than ever, this is true in online environments that lack cognitive resources and where interaction takes place between strangers. Therefore, consumers are forced to evaluate the credibility of online consumer reviews on the basis of informational and normative factors.

In a discussion thread the original posting is usually followed by comments from readers of the blog who want to state their opinion on the subject. However, the topic may evolve radically off-topic when users change the subject as the discussion goes on. The discussions of the empirical data gathered from the blog have a lot of topic divergence, which does not serve the purpose of users seeking for product information in the original post of the blogger. (Li, Wang, Chen & Lin, 2010, 257–258)

The nature of the consumer reviews posted on the blog had the tendency to shift from topic to off-topic, research data had to be delimited to comments that were on-topic. Also, questions intended to the blogger were found to be off-topic, as they do not offer any helpful information to other readers. Therefore, they too were found irrelevant as empirical data. Out of 131 consumer reviews, 55 per cent were on-topic and 45 per cent were off-topic. It is important to note that limiting the study to a half of the initial number of reviews collected from the blog may decrease the reliability of the study.

## 4.1 Argument quality

Argument quality refers to the strength or quality of the received information. (Cheung et al. 2009, 15) Online consumer reviews were explored in terms of ease of comprehension, evidence presence, opposing viewpoints and comprehensiveness. The table in appendix 1 illustrates the occurrence of these factors in both Beautify.fi and in the discussion threads of the blog. The figures imply that online customer reviews contain more indication of argument quality than online consumer reviews posted in the blog. They are therefore more likely to be considered credible and thus a more reliable source of product information. All figures in this chapter are found in appendix 1.

### Ease of comprehension

An online consumer review needs to be easily comprehended in order to be credible. Furthermore, a review is more persuasive when eyes can easily scan it. Therefore, factors such as message length and grammatical structures make a difference between a comprehensive and a non-comprehensive review. Also, the use of point-formats like numbered lists, bullet points, separate paragraphs and transitional words make an argument more understandable. (Li & Zhan, 2011).

The username “Sparkles” divides her review on Lumene’s Natural code skin perfector foundation in clear paragraphs, which helps the reader quickly browse through her text. However, the grammatical structure of her sentences is complicated. She fails to write complete sentences by separating different sentences with commas making it more difficult to follow her trail of thought:

*Light, covers pretty well but not an amazing foundation..Did not prevent shine more than a few hours without powdering, I have greasy skin.*

*The package is boring, does not attract attention. Also there is quite little of the product in the tube, it felt like the product ran out quickly.*

*I give a plus for the wide selection of shades and especially there is a diverse amount of light shades. –Sparkles (Beautify)*

Almost one fourth of the online consumer reviews analyzed from Beautify.fi used paragraphs and only less than 2 per cent used point-formats. The username “Nnuutti” lists the plusses and the minuses of Lumene’s Beauty Base eyeshadow primer using point-format which increase the credibility of the review:

*My biggest disappointment of Lumene’s products that I have experienced so far.*

*+Packaging is convenient*

*+Price is not distressing*

*– Immediately when you apply the product on a customer’s eye lid and move on to apply the eye shadow, the product has already made stripes on the eye lid. So it moves on its own and how it wants on the eye lid, and doesn’t keep still.*

*–Nnuutti (Beautify)*

Her review is easy to understand both grammatically and structure-wise. The message is not long but brings forth the essentials. According to linguistic research message length can make a difference on how convincing the review is, and longer messages are more likely to decrease argument quality. (Lowrey, 1998) However, as much as 73 per cent of the online consumer reviews on Beautify.fi failed to use any kind of grammatical structure such as paragraphs, which resulted in long sentences that made the review harder to comprehend. Breaking down sentences and dividing the message into sections would make the reviews easier for the reader to scan through, especially when the reader has limited time browsing information on the product (Li & Zhan, 2011).

Furthermore, there is a clear absence of reviews that use grammatical structures or point-formats when it comes to online consumer reviews written on the blogs. The use of point-formats was only a little lower than on Beautify, however the use of paragraphs was very rare; nearly 2,5 times lower than on Beautify. Reviews on the blog were also more likely to use unstructured sentences:

*it really is a good foundation, I applied it with my fingers so it turned out perfect, i was a little anxious that I shifted from the CC-cream but luckily wasn't disappointed! –heartbeat (Blog)*

The reviewer above fails to use capital letters or periods between her sentences. Her style of writing may even be seen as slightly restless. In fact, consumers appeared to write more chat-like messages on the discussion boards of blogs paying little attention to grammar. Although they expressed their opinions on the product, they seemed to care less about how their messages would appear to other readers. As stated by Schindler & Bickart (2005) consumers pay more attention to wording in an online setting making it an essential factor when consumers evaluate the credibility of online consumer reviews. The reviews on Beautify had a more polished touch than the review on the blog, which may be explained by the fact that consumers are more concentrated when they post it on a review site than on the discussion thread of a blog which resembles more of a casual conversation.

### **Evidence presence**

The use of legitimate quotations affects how readers assess the credibility of a review (Reynolds & Reynolds, 2002). The quotations found in the online consumer reviews were merely information that supported the arguments in the review such as usage stories or specific experiences with the product (Cox & Cox, 2001). There is strong evidence presence in the review below by the username “Chili” who gives a detailed description of how well Lumene’s CC-foundation lasted on her skin:

*Lumene’s CC-foundation lasted surprisingly long in good shape, although it vanished entirely from the tip and sides of my nose after about 4–5 hours. Most foundations don’t last over 3 hours on my skin, so a quite good accomplishment on that account. –Chili (Beautify)*

Another example of a review that clearly states the writer's own experience with the product is the review by username "jenn1". She brings out clear personal references and evidence that supports her claims on the blur foundation:

*I JUST bought myself shade 0, which looks slightly grey and dark, but at least it works OK under the pallid light of the office. Today I used it on my face for the first time. Somehow I would've presumed this to suit better for normal-dry skin rather than my greasy mixed skin, because the texture felt maybe even surprisingly greasy. I didn't feel any crazy kicks immediately but I'll keep trying it...* —jenn1 (Blog)

She explains how the product worked for her specifically as a person with greasy and mixed skin referring to herself throughout the entire review, thus giving a personal feel to the message. The sense of first-person experience is an important credibility element (Schindler & Bickart, 2005).

When the reader of an online review is unable to fully clarify who is providing the information in the message, it is important that there is evidence that backs up their in a logical and factual way. Thus, reviews that lack evidence to support the claims in the review are less convincing (Li & Zhan, 2011), such as the review below written by username "isabellaaa" on the blueberry eyebrow pen:

*Really nice! Natural shade that lasts well. Convenient package.* —isabellaaa (Beautify)

By not providing any evidence to support her claim, such as giving additional details on how the product works, her review is likely to be considered less credible compared to the review written by "Chili" or "jenni1". Thus, a review should always include a personal reference. For instance, the username "Janet Fantazya" explains how her skin reacts negatively to silicon-based products:

*Oh shoot. I'm really interested in testing the product, but my skin immediately reacts badly to products that have silicon. A white headed army of pimples attack in a few hours and those devils last for two days :( Otherwise I'm totally interested! –Janet Fantazya (Blog)*

Her message however shows no sign of personal experience with the actual product discussed, as she only talks about being interested in the product. Reviews like these were more common on the blog than on the review website. Moreover, 85 per cent of the reviews on Beautify contained supportive claims and evidence, whereas only 34 per cent of the reviews on the blog had any arguments that provided well-founded evidence. This shows that messages in blogs seem to provide less evidence and therefore may not be as likely to offer reliable information to consumers.

### **Opposing viewpoints**

Two-sided messages, where both the strengths and the weaknesses of a product are covered, are usually considered more credible than one-sided messages (Li & Zhan, 2011). Even so the review needs to noticeably pick a side at the end or else it might not be assessed as credible. In the review below, “emmi314” explains how the product suits normal skin but not greasy skin:

*A good eye primer for daily use. Keeps my eye shadow in place for the whole day (6–8h), but may let off heavy makeup by the end of the day. My eyelids don't get greasy or dry, but for a few people that I have put make up on, the product stuck in the dry parts of their eyelids. However, the product suits normal eyelids. Also evens color differences in eyelids. Very long-lasting. I would buy the product again because of its good price–quality ratio. –emmi314 (Beautify)*

She brings out the product's pros and cons, but at the same time recommends the product for normal skin pointing out a few of its positive features. In the end she clearly states that she would buy the product again. For a review to reflect credibility it needs to

clearly state the opinion of the writer which “emmi314” manages to do (Li & Zhan, 2011).

Also the review by username “kalpea” is a two-sided review that criticizes the Longwear blur foundation still recommending it at the same time:

*Shade 0 is a bit lighter than what market foundations usually are. For me it was maybe half a shade too dark, but when spread and faded out there's no mark of shade difference between my face and my neck. You should at least go try it.*  
–kalpea (Blog)

She explains how the foundation is lighter than most foundations she has experienced before, and states that it was a bit too dark for her. However, she clearly recommends the foundation despite this small weakness. Her standpoint is therefore obvious making her review credible in term of opposing viewpoints (Li & Zhan, 2011). However, this does not apply to the review below written by username “Hillukka:

*I have surface dry, sensitive (red cheeks) skin, greasy on the T-areas with big pores on my nose. This Lumene Bright Now BB is my new absolute favorite! It applies and sets easily and quickly! And it blurs my visible big pores really well (better than previous BB-creams that I have tried), after the first try I wondered whether its really true that such a good BB exists! :D And I don't need a moisturizer underneath.* –Hillukka (Blog)

“Hillukka” describes her experience with the BB-cream in a very strong and positive way. Yet, she does not provide any opposing views giving a one-sided opinion that only praises the product. Thus, if the review fails to support a specific preference it is likely to be seen as less credible (Li & Zhan, 2011). This also goes for the review written by “Lottako”:

*Really pleasant on the skin, doesn't leave a heavy feeling. Easy to apply and covers surprisingly well. The sun protection filter is a nice addition. Doesn't last*



*on greasy areas for very long without a primer, but nothing lasts on my nose anyway. A little minus on the fact that I have impurities appearing on my skin more than usual, for this reason I might switch the product over to occasional use. –Lottako (Beautify)*

She gives both negative and positive feedback on the product, but does not state her overall position. Thus, her review leaves the reader wondering whether the product was good or not. It is essential for a review to clearly express their opinion in order to convey credibility (Li & Zhan, 2011).

Over half of the online consumer reviews on Beautify were two-sided messages that had more than one viewpoint on the product. The other half consisted of one-sided messages that highlighted just one perspective of the product. Therefore the majority of reviews on Beautify consisted of opposing viewpoints, which increase their credibility as a source of information (Li & Zhan, 2011). However, only 26 per cent of the reviews on the blog were two-sided, which meant that most of the information consumers provided on the discussion threads were one-sided messages that lacked opposing viewpoints. As stated by Li & Zhan (2011) online consumer reviews that contain opposing viewpoints show stronger signs of argument quality and therefore the reviews posted on Beautify are more likely to be considered credible in terms of this factor.

### **Comprehensiveness**

Since the measures for comprehensiveness have been inconsistent and subjective in most studies, this study decided to follow the example of Li & Zhan (2011) by using more objective and observable measures, such as the amount of product features in the review and review length expressed in number of words. The more the review brings out product attributes, the more likely it is considered credible.

*Suitable coverage, spreads well on skin (except tends to become stuck in really dry areas), skin starts to shine slightly during the day, but the product's price-quality ratio is perfect. Minus for the fact that it is difficult to squeeze the last drops out of the tube. –SuviR (Beautify)*

The username “SuviR” brings out quite a few features of the natural code skin perfector foundation; price, quality, coverage, application, package and durability. Her review can be considered sufficient in terms of comprehensiveness, as it is rich with different features (Li & Zhan, 2011). A consumer reading her review will receive a sufficient amount of information on the foundation’s attributes. Also the review below offers a lot of information on the actual product and how it functions:

*I suspected this eye shadow pen would be too greasy, but it is just sturdy enough and evens well :) and eye shadows look really bright on top of it. My eyelids have the tendency to become greasy but with this my makeup stays on tight like a glove, but can still be removed effortlessly. The only minus that I can think of is that when I sharpened the pen for the first time the product inside started escaping the pen and it left an even stump that didn’t go back inside the pen :o I have now carefully applied the product with the tip of the pen but it really bummed me out that it broke... –msr (Blog)*

A review that brings out more details of the cosmetics product shows more credibility than a review that lacks to mention important features of the product (Li & Zhan, 2011). An example of such a reviews is shown below:

*The tester in the store didn’t convince me. However, I found some product testers that I could take home with me and was surprised! The product covered fairly well and looked natural on my skin. I was surprised and luckily I still have a few testers left..hoarder :D –Anskubansku (Beautify)*

In her review “Anskubansku” only mentions how the foundation covered her skin and how it looked on her. The fact that no other features were introduced shows little credibility in terms of comprehensiveness. Cosmetics products especially are evaluated on various different attributes and consumers consider many aspects before making a purchase decision. Therefore a review with only a couple of attributes is not useful to a consumer who is especially looking for more information on the product. On these grounds, the review by “SuviR” is more comprehensive since it offers a richer

description of the product (Li & Zhan, 2011). A review that strongly focuses on the product's attributes is generally seen as a more reliable source of information than information that is generated by marketers (Lee & Youn, 2009). This means that the presence of marketing ambitions is less likely.

Also the username "Annukka" fails to mention features although she seems fond of the Lumene blur foundation:

*I also recommend this strongly! An amazing cream! I get the best end result when I apply a little transparent finishing powder on top. –Annukka (Blog)*

There is very little or no indication at all of how the foundation actually works. Readers of the review may not necessarily find the review helpful when it lacks useful information on the product's attributes, which they could use in their purchase decisions.

As illustrated in appendix 1, the reviews posted on Beautify mentioned around 4 features in average, whereas reviews posted on the blog mentioned 3 features in average. This implies that reviews on Beautify indicate more credibility than review on the blog, as Li & Zhan (2011) state that the comprehensiveness of a message increases with the amount of features it holds. As comprehensiveness can also be evaluated by message length in words, the average message length on Beautify was 49 words and 46 words on the blog. These figures are very close to each other, so no big comparisons can be made in terms of comprehensiveness. As there is no previous research on online consumer reviews written on beauty products, it is impossible to say whether the message length represented in the reviews reflect credibility or not.

## 4.2 Framing

The credibility of a review can be assessed in regard to whether the message is negatively or positively framed. The table of appendix 1 presents the occurrence of both

negative and positive framing in the analyzed online consumer reviews. It was found that consumers post a positively framed review three times more often than a negatively framed review. This supports Kanouse & Hanson (1972) who state that the social environment is full of positive cues so negative cues are more rare. Therefore, negatively framed reviews are more likely to be considered credible. However, this cannot be assumed as 89 per cent of the negatively framed reviews on Beautify show intensive elements that have been shown to decrease credibility (Bowers 1963). Thus, the amount of negativity should be moderate in order for the message to reflect reliability. (Fiske, 1980) Merely 10 per cent of the analyzed reviews on Beautify are negatively framed, but keep a neutral tone, which means that it is uncommon for a review to be framed negatively without coming off strong.

Consumers tend to avoid risks and therefore take negative opinions more seriously than positive ones (Fiske, 1980). A negatively framed review written by the username “Johanna” is presented below:

*Does not do its job, at least not on my eyelids. I use pretty dark eye makeup and with this primer the eye shadows goes into my eyelid furrow unpleasantly, although I first pat foundation on my eyelids, then apply the primer and powder my eyelids before adding eye shadow. I don't recommend this, if you use dark eye shadow or if you have even slightly greasy skin. I also think that it doesn't change the pigment of the eye shadow, and the tube is nice, but just doesn't work for me :( –Johanna (Beautify)*

As stated by Cheung et al (2007) a negatively framed message has more influence than a positively framed review. Although the review is clearly negative, positive elements are also presented to the reader. The review has a strong personal opinion on how well the product works on greasy skin without coming on too hard. Also it is likely to be assessed credible since negative opinions attract more attention than positive opinions (Kanouse & Hanson, 1972).

*An amazing product! Sticks to eyebrows, but not to skin. You can add color by adding layers. Gives a more natural end result than an eyebrow pencil + the shape comes out better. I will surely buy it again. –jomahama (Beautify)*

A positively framed review like the one above written by “jomahama” praises the product very strongly by saying the product is amazing. Applauding reviews like this are more likely to be seen as untrustworthy (Schindler & Bickart, 2005). Therefore it is a sign of credibility when a review provides even a slight amount of negative information, since this little bit of negativity can increase the argument quality of a message (Fiske, 1980).

### **4.3 Source credibility**

As stated by Wathen & Burkell (2002) the information available on the source or author of a message has a heavy impact on how a consumer sees the credibility of an online review. Therefore, in an online environment the reviewer’s profile becomes an important object of evaluation, especially when normal face-to-face attributes are taken out of the picture. Appendix 1 illustrates the occurrence of certain credibility determinants of usage experience, attractiveness and language intensity.

#### **Usage experience**

For a review to indicate credibility, it needs to articulate usage experience. According to the research by Li & Zhan (2011) a review should articulate that the reviewer either owns the product or has tried it somewhere. It is important that the reader is convinced that the reviewer has used the product herself.

*It is the most used product in my makeup bag, which keeps eye shadow still for the whole day (or even through a bar night). Sometimes it clusters in my eyelid furrow though, but that can be fixed quickly by evening it out with a finger. I like! –laurakpn (Beautify)*

The username “laurakpn” clearly owns a matt powder foundation. She tells about her usage experience with the powder by referring to how it performed both during day and night. She therefore describes the product objectively bringing out its advantages and disadvantages. She not only brings out her experience, but also offers advice. Her review is written from a personal point of view and therefore reflects credibility (Li & Zhan, 2011). For example, giving a concrete tip on how to use the cosmetics product shows that the reviewer has know-how and information that is useful.

However, a review is more likely to be less trustworthy when there is no reference to a personal usage situation like in the review below:

*A good product for those who want a natural end result without a perfectly covering matt surface. Not at all floury, but blends nicely into skin. –iloski (Beautify)*

In this review by “iloski” there is no indication of the writer actually using the product herself. Of course, it could be assumed but for a review to fully show that it is reliable it needs to clearly state that the experiences are personal (Li & Zhan, 2011). A reader of a consumer review will feel more connected to a personal message and is more likely to consider is authentic (Schindler & Bickart, 2011). Also, the presence of marketing intensions is minimized when personal experience dominates the message (Lee & Youn, 2009).

80 per cent of the analyzed online consumer reviews on Beautify had a reference to a personal experience with the product. This is a very good sign and shows that online consumer reviews on Beautify are rich in personal references and usage experiences that affect the credibility assessment of a consumer positively (Wathen & Burkell, 2002).

Then again, a review where the write clearly admits to not using the product herself does not provide useful information to other consumers:

*I don't have experience of this blur foundation but you should try the Lumene CC-cream, it's a lighter shade than the BB and a perfect product overall :) (however, the blur shade 0 is said to resemble the light shade of the CC-cream) –ttude (Blog)*

The message is left on a speculative level showing very little sign of being a reliable source of information. The phrase “is said to resemble” is hearsay, which is very difficult to trust. The review therefore lacks authenticity and proof of personal usage. Even if the writer has had personal experience with the product, they need to sound convincing (Li & Zhan, 2011). The username “Roosa” does not know how to use the product in the correct way, which raises a red flag on whether her expertise can be trusted. Her credibility as a trustworthy source of information may therefore be questioned.

*I got a tube from my mother not long ago, and it has really given my face a lovely glow and translucency! But the problem is that I don't really know on which area it should be applied on! On the whole face or just the nose, forehead, cheekbones, below the eyebrow and on top of the upper lip? Do you have any tips? (: –Roosa (Blog)*

The messages on Beautify had around 20 per cent more references to the writer's own usage than the messages on the blog. Slightly over 80 per cent of all reviews had a personal indication, where the writer used words such as “I”, “my” or “myself” (Schindler & Bickart, 2005), or gave a description of product usage. For the reviews on the blog's discussion threads the figure was much lower, only 62 per cent reflected credibility in terms of usage experience.

### **Language intensity and wording**

At least 10 per cent of the analyzed online consumer reviews on Beautify failed to use punctuation marks or proper sentences. For the messages on the blog the percentage was higher, around 30 per cent. Especially common were messages that lacked capital

letters and separated sentences with commas rather than periods. Consumers evaluate the credibility of online reviews by assessing the language and wording of the review (Schindler & Bickart, 2005). Therefore the use of proper sentences, correct spelling and punctuating marks gives a more credible impression. The lack of proper language may create frustration and annoyance, which may imply that the reviewer has low intelligence. (Menkveld, 2013, 22)

Stylistic features can affect the way a reader perceives the trustworthiness of the source. A review that has a lot of emotion-laden words or graphic language may come across too strong. (Bowers 1963) Therefore, intensive language such as the number of exclamations marks and the presence of strong emotions affects credibility.

As shown in the table of appendix 1, altogether 68 per cent of the analyzed reviews contained emotion-laden words or intensive language on Beautify, and 43 per cent on the blog. Most of them used exclamations marks, which were noted as a sign of intensive language (Bowers 1963). Moreover, the majority of intensive cues found in the reviews were positively driven like in the review below:

*The selection of shades is excellent, you can find a shade for every taste! I have it almost in every shade. Really good price–quality ratio. The product texture is quite sticky, but it still doesn't feel too sticky on my lips, but actually spreads well! I myself use nude shades for day makeup and darker shades at night. I warmly recommend it! –haidy (Beautify)*

Some adverbs, adjectives and phrases are more intensive than others (Cliff, 1959). Words like “pleasant”, “disgusting”, “slightly” and “extremely” can be considered intensive. Furthermore phrases like ”best of all” or “don’t care for it” imply that the writer has an extreme stand on the issue. The review by username “haidy” includes two exclamations marks and an intensive word like “excellent”. The phrase “I have it almost in every shade” shows strong emotion and an obvious personal preference towards the product. Another review that displays extreme emotion is a review written by “Vipatus”:



*As a lip-gloss heavy user I looooooove Lumene Natural Code glosses. The applicator is borderline perfect, the scent is mild and wonderful. It doesn't smudge. Perfect (however needs lip balm under). "all will be collected, all will be collected!" –Vipatus (Beautify)*

She uses intensive adjectives like “ perfect” and “wonderful”. The phrase “I looooooove” demonstrates an extreme position (Cliff, 1959). Also the review below uses intensive wording such as “the perfect shade for me” and “best”.

*I just bought that new Lumene matt foundation from Stocka! Really lovely, concealing and the perfect shade for me! My shade is the lightest Light Ivory. I'm in love, the best foundation in the world. Best! –mirriäinen (Blog)*

Reviews on Beautify had more messages with negative intensive language (21 per cent) than messages on the blog (6 per cent). When intense language is negative it may lower the credibility of an online review (Schindler & Bickart, 2005).

*I won't buy it. Because the texture was wrong for my eyelids. Color was nice, but otherwise a horrible smell and the texture was wrong and the makeup really doesn't last for the whole day even if you wanted! :) –ChikitaPassion*

In her review “ChikitaPassion” uses intensely negative words such as “wrong” and “horrible” which can be considered emotion-laden words that reflect an extreme and negative point of view. Also, the phrase “I won't buy” states a clear standpoint that strongly implies the product is not worth it. Intense language makes the writer appear extreme in their position and thus lowers credibility (Bowers 1963).

## **Attractiveness**

The credibility of a message is also influenced by the reviewer's attractiveness (Hoyland & Weiss, 1951). Looking at Appendix 1, there is a considerable amount of

information on the reviewer who goes by the name of “Anskubansku”. The user’s picture lets on that she is young and takes care of her appearance. Secondly, her profile provides basic physical information about her that is especially called for when it comes to beauty products for which performance is strongly dependent on personal features. Furthermore, attributes such as the reviewer’s hair color, shade, hair type, hair quality, skin type, skin color, shade of skin and the color of the eyes are attached to the profile, that indicate authenticity and the identity of the consumer (Schindler & Bickart, 2005).

Anskubansku states in her profile that she has straight, semi-thick, brown hair that has a warm shade. Her skin type is normal, the shade of her skin warm, her skin tone falls into the middle and her eyes are green. Furthermore, these attributes are accordant with Anskubansku’s profile picture, and this link between information may convince a reader of her reliability. In fact, 32 per cent of the analyzed reviews on Beautify.fi had a picture of the author like Anskubansku. When the reviewer posts their picture to the profile it gives an idea of how the person behind the message looks like. Any indication of the identity of the consumer behind the review may reflect credibility (Schindler & Bickart, 2005). This may even enable some consumers to feel a sense of familiarity or similarity with the reviewer. Hence, the appearance, either in picture or descriptive form, offers readers cues that they can use to assess the credibility of the source.

There was a big difference in attractiveness compared to messages posted on Beautify and messages posted on the blog. Almost 33 per cent of the reviews on Beautify had a picture of the author, whereas only 7 per cent of the reviews on the blog had a picture. The nature of the platform may be a reason why consumers do not post their picture on blog discussion boards. Both platforms have the ability to create a personal profile, however, it seems to be more common to have a profile on a review site rather than in a blog community. Reviewers on the blog were extremely anonymous making it impossible to evaluate their attractiveness. Therefore, reviews on Beautify are more likely to be seen as credible as they provide more personal information making it easier for a consumer to trust the message (Li & Zhan, 2011).

## **Virtual credentials**

Since physical features are seldom available in an online setting, credibility needs to be evaluated by other means. The reviewer's reputation on the platform can reflect source credibility (Cheung et al., 2009). Thus, previous posts and ratings from others on the reviewer affect the trustworthiness of the source. As shown in appendix 2, "Anskubansku" has posted 137 reviews on the website making her a Beautify top 10 reviewer. This sort of ranking system among reviewers further aids consumers to assess the trustworthiness of a source and helps consumers to decide whether the reviewer's opinion is reliable or not.

On the other hand, when evaluating appendix 3 the case is very different. This reviewer goes by the name of "Haidy" who has only written one review on the website. In addition, she is ranked in the top 500 Beautify reviewers that puts her in the very bottom. Furthermore, her profile lacks a picture. However, it is compulsory for all Beautify profiles to include basic physical attributes in the profile, so Haidy's profile also displays the key features of her skin, hair and eyes. Yet, Haidy is anonymous and cannot be evaluated by any previous record of messages. Virtual credentials are identity characteristics of the reviewer make it easier for the reader to trust the arguments in the review, especially in an online environment, where physical features are difficult to convey, any personal indications are essential in terms of credibility (Wathen and Burkell, 2002). Haidy's review is therefore less likely to be considered credible since it leaves too much room for doubt in terms of her identity.

The Beautify website itself facilitates the conveyance of identity cues. The evaluation of credibility becomes easier when the administrator creates a system where prior records, contributions and posts are archived and brought forth on the reviewer's profile (Cheung et al., 2009). Beautify.fi provides easy access links to the reviewer's earlier posts, as well as states how many reviews the person has written altogether. Thus, Beautify.fi is a strong enabler of virtual credentials as it helps consumers to evaluate the credibility of online messages on its website

Virtual credentials were almost non-existent in messages posted on the blog. A common profile looked like the one in appendix 6, which lacks cues of any sorts of credentials. It is obvious that the messages on Beautify provide much more identity characteristics that consumers can use to evaluate the credibility of the review, compared to reviews written on the blog.

#### **4.4 Information consistency**

Information consistency cannot be evaluated in this study, as it requires knowledge on the prior beliefs of the readers of the reviews. The data in this study is limited to textual discourse generated by the reviewers making it impossible to analyze the prior beliefs of the readers, as this would require another research method such as in-depth interviews. Since information consistency is assessed by the confirmation of prior beliefs (Cheung et al., 2009), this study is unable to analyze it as a factor of credibility from the empirical data.

#### **4.5 Normative cues**

On top of informational cues, consumers also use normative cues to help them evaluate the credibility of online consumer reviews. Information on how other people think about the product affects the reader's judgment and credibility assessment. Some studies have found that normative influences may even change the reader's personal opinions (Li & Zhan, 2009). Normative determinants can be assessed with review consistency and review rating. These differ from each other in the sense that review consistency involves the opinions of other reviewers, whereas review rating considers the opinions of fellow review readers. The reviews written on the discussion boards of the blog lacked almost all normative cues, so primary analysis was conducted on reviews on Beautify.

### Review consistency

Figure 10 shows six of the most frequently shared consumer opinions on Lumene's beauty eye shadow primer from 22 different consumer reviews posted on Beautify. Overall 48 comments mentioned the six most frequently commented product attributes: long endurance, ability to even the tone of the eyelid, a sufficient amount of product, good price-quality ratio, tendency to pile up in the eyelid furrow and good availability in stores. Five of the attributes are positively framed comments and one is negative framed.

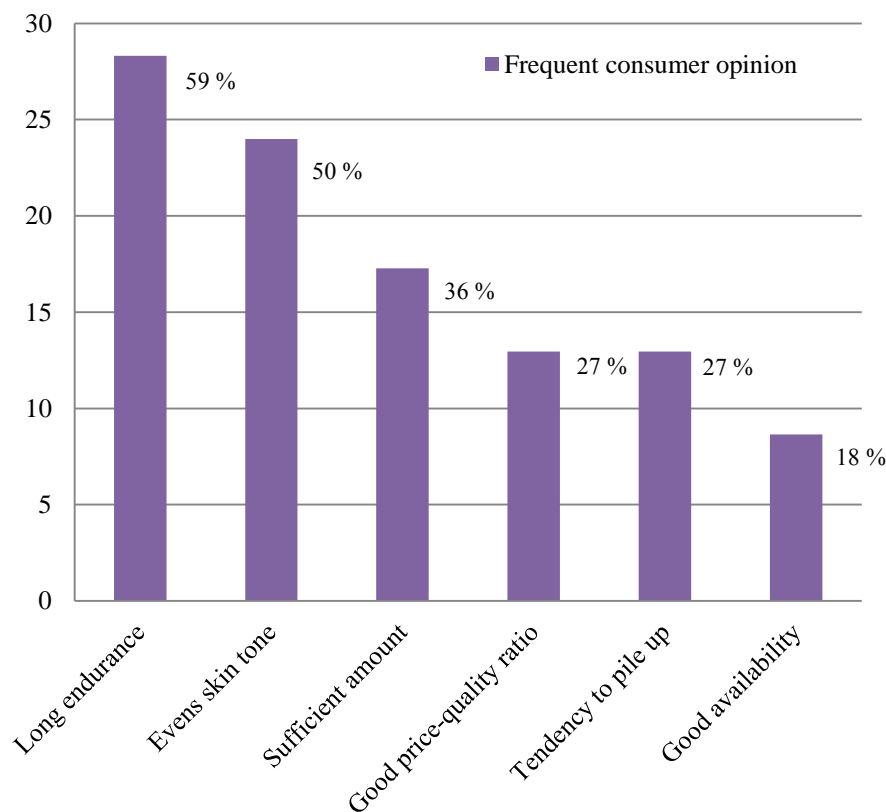


Figure 10. Evaluating review consistency (Product: Lumene eye shadow primer)

The majority of consumers (59 per cent) who posted a review on the primer felt that the product endured long on their skin. In addition, half of the consumers felt that the

product evened the skin tone of their eyelid. The more consumers share the same experiences with a product, the more reliable the information becomes to the reader. Consistency between consumer opinions increases the credibility of an online consumer review (Zhang & Watts, 2003). Thus, in this case a consumer looking for an eye shadow primer feels more convinced by this particular primer's potential of being long-lasting. As it is the most consistent opinion among consumers, it may be considered a trustworthy piece of information.

On the other hand, 18 per cent of consumers stated that the product had good availability in stores. Although this is among the most common opinions, this attribute may have lower credibility than the one mentioned before. In other words, the less there is consistency among opinions, the less a consumer believes in its validity (Zhang & Watts, 2003). Thus, inconsistency indicates that the review has a smaller chance of being used as a reliable source of information.

*I disagree with the other users on the fact that the product stays on for a long time. –pinkskinny*

Username "pinkskinny" disagrees with the majority opinion. This makes her review inconsistent with most other reviews on the same product. The reader of the review may consider this confusing and perceive the review untrustworthy (Zhang & Watts, 2003). Almost 60 per cent of the consumer reviews commended the primer for its long endurance. However, according to this single consumer review the product did not endure a long time. It is essential to bear in mind that cosmetics products are very personal and their performance is often linked to individual features of, for example skin type. This will of course create various borderline cases where a product that performs well on one person's skin will not perform as well on another's. Regardless, consumer comments like these are inconsistent with the majority of consumer opinions; thus, they are more likely to be considered less credible sources of information. This is because people are more likely to trust normative opinions (Zhang & Watts, 2003).

Beautify utilizes ratings to provide information on the majority consumer perspective. Each product is given an overall pie chart on how many consumers recommend the product and how many do not recommend the product. In appendix 4, Natural Code skin perfector is recommended by 69 per cent of consumers and not recommended by 30 per cent of consumers. Thus, the foundation is generally recommended by almost 70 per cent of consumers. This of course is a good sign and gives consumers reading reviews on the product assurance of its capabilities when most of the opinions recommend the foundation.

Furthermore, Beautify provides an average overall score for the product on each product review page. This score represents the overall opinion of the reviewers. In appendix 4, 26 reviewers have rated the foundation with an overall average score of 3,6 (score is given from 1–5). Scores are also given more specifically on the quality of the product, packaging of the product and the ingredients of the product; these all being fundamental aspects of a beauty product and thus worthy of mention. Displaying average opinions among reviewers aids consumers reading the reviews to evaluate which aspects of the product to believe (Zhang & Watts, 2003).

### **Review rating**

On Beautify the thumb up and thumb down icon shows how many readers felt that the review was helpful and how many felt that it was not helpful. This icon is displayed in both Appendix 2 and 3. On the blog, the heart icon in appendix 5 and 6 is intended for the same purpose, although it stands for liking or loving the review rather than how helpful it was. Nevertheless, even though both platforms offer the possibility to rate the review, users hardly use the function. Only a few reviews have been rated in terms of their helpfulness on Beautify, and one or two reviews have been “liked” on the blog. Moreover, the less this function is used, the less it can be used as a normative cue to evaluate credibility.

Review rating becomes a useful tool for assessment only when it sufficiently showcases what others have thought about the review. This overall rating given by other readers of

the review needs to be visible and the reader of a review needs to be able to evaluate the credibility of the message by looking at reactions from previous readers of the review (Cheung et al., 2009). The reason why consumers neglect to utilize the function on Beautify and on the blog is unknown and calls for future research. It also raises the question on whether consumers really need this function at all.

## 4.6 Amplified eWOM

It is difficult to assess whether the study data consists of amplified eWOM. However, some of the reviews had implications of company-initiated information, especially the ones posted on the blog.

*My favorite powder that promises an anti-shine and ultra-natural end result. On top of all, it is fragrance-free, does not contain parabens, and is contain 97 % of natural ingredients! –ainomaria (Beautify)*

EWOM may be boosted by marketers, who intentionally attempt to raise conversation about a certain product or a brand. (WOMMA, 2011) The review above feels like a marketing speech. Most reviews have a less pushy feel and describe product features in a more personal way. This review however seems to list the products strong points in a manner that may even be seen as scripted (Schindler & Bickart, 2005). Therefore, it has some implications of amplified eWOM.

*Lumene has clearly risen above the level of basic mass-market cosmetics brands. The colors are fresh and trendy, but suited for everyday use. Their products endure well and they often bring out new and interesting novelties. The look of the brand is modern and the staff at their Helsinki department store is always professional. Even the prices of the products are reasonable. I like!*  
–NeitiN



The review above seems to only praise the brand without giving any indication of personal experience. The description is almost too precise: brand position, brand image, pricing, staff, product functionality and suitability. Even if the marketer influenced the message, the content was generated by “NeitiN”, who engaged in the actual conversation (Kulmala et al. 2013, 21). The review lacks a real product experience and may therefore be considered less credible. When consumers seek for information online they are prone to trust reviews that they can relate to. Therefore, a review that feels disguised and gives the impression of amplified eWOM may not be ranked the highest in terms of credibility.

#### **4.7 Conclusions and managerial implications**

Online consumer reviews play a major role in the beauty industry as a helpful tool for consumers to research beauty products. The Finnish consumer uses 170 euros on average on cosmetics and toiletry products annually. (Teknokemian yhdistys, 2014) Cosmetics products are considered a necessity and Finnish women use around 13 minutes a day to do their makeup. Moreover, makeup has established an ordinary role in the daily routine of consumers. However, it may also act as a reward or a cheering stimulant. (Kauneusseminaari, 2015)

A consumer buying cosmetics involves approximately six products in their set of alternatives and picks one or two for purchase. Moreover, a consumer buying cosmetics spends around 4 minutes to exploring product information, testers or samples. (Kauneusseminaari, 2015) Therefore, information seeking is essential to a consumer making a purchase decision, especially in the alternative-evaluation stage (Mudambi & Schuff, 2010).

Today’s consumer is more demanding than before, which results in more selective purchase decision processes. Consumers constantly wait for launches of new novelties, but simultaneously brand loyalty is decreasing. In fact, most consumers are prone to buy cosmetics icons rather than brands. They partake in a constant search for the perfect

cosmetics product that fulfills their need completely. Consumers nowadays are also much more sensitive to price, and pay more attention to the product's price-quality ratio. They are more open to purchasing very technical and complex products as long as they fulfill their needs, which in turn call for a greater need to seek information beforehand. Furthermore, consumers buying cosmetics are more self-imposed which has led to more and more consumers gathering information online. (Kauneusseminari, 2015) This means that comprehensiveness, in terms of the richness of features, is a highly important credibility determinant for cosmetics consumer reviews (Li & Zhan, 2011).

In face-to-face situations people tend to avoid dealing with strangers. It is in our nature to keep away from people we do not know or trust to avoid situations where we are harmed or exploited. People prefer to take advice and information from family and friends because they are familiar with the source and consider them honest and trustworthy. When people know where the information is coming from it is easier for them to estimate its value. Therefore, from a WOM perspective it is uncommon to trust information provided by a stranger, as there is a bigger risk of dishonesty and wrong intentions (Menkveld, 2013).

On that note, it is contradictory that this is not the case in terms of eWOM. If we do not trust complete strangers in real life situations, why do we trust them online? Is it not strange, that in an online setting we are able to drop our shields and loosen our boundaries? More than 80 per cent of online shoppers use consumer reviews when making purchase decisions. Even when non-verbal cues are taken out of the picture consumers seem to be able to trust product information provided by strangers online. (Menkveld, 2013).

An explanation to this contradiction may be found from the Nielsen report (2007), which says that eWOM offers a wider access to more diverse and broader sources of information. In other words, there is a lot more product information available on the Internet than anywhere else. When consumers have a wide display of information they are able to make their own opinion more easily. Since consumers are not always able to

trust information online, they use factors such as information consistency and consensus among consumers to help them contemplate credibility (Schindler & Bickart, 2005).

This study not only highlights the most essential factors that consumers evaluate when reading online consumer reviews, but also answers to the question of contradiction. By analyzing credibility factors the study contributes to explaining how consumers are assess the advice given by complete strangers online, and what in particular in the message makes it a trustworthy source of information. The outcome of the study therefore offers a concrete case example of which determinants consumers assess in terms of reliable eWOM.

Appendices 7 and 8 synthesize the findings of the study. Both figures in the appendices demonstrate what indicators consumers are able to use to evaluate the credibility in online consumer reviews. The factors identified shape up the consumer's credibility assessment (Mendes-Filho & Tan, 2009). In appendix 7 the synthesis of the theoretical framework is adapted to the findings from Beautify, and in Appendix 8 adapted to the findings from the blog of Saara Sarvas.

In terms of informational determinants, reviews posted on Beautify show more indications of credibility than reviews posted on the blog's discussion threads. First of all reviews on Beautify had stronger argument quality. Although factors that ease the comprehension of a review were low, there was a high level of supportive claims that reflect credibility, especially since strong arguments create positive attitudes towards the information. (Cheung et al. 2009) Reviews on Beautify had a lot more two-sided messages and commonly introduced more than one perspective. They often covered both strengths and weaknesses of a product which is an indicator of credibility. (Li & Zhan, 2011) The reviews on Beautify were also very rich in features which made them more comprehensive than the reviews on the blog. Blog reviews failed to indicate credibility on all fronts of argument quality showing very little informational signs of credibility.

Secondly, reviews on Beautify had stronger source credibility than reviews on the blog's discussion threads. They had more indications of product usage experiences, virtual credentials and reviewer identity characteristics which all reflect credibility (Li & Zhan, 2011). As for the reviews on the blog, virtual credentials were non-existent and the level of identity indicators very low making them questionable in terms of source credibility. Also, wording and language were used more properly on Beautify than in reviews posted on the blog. The proper use of language indicate that the reviewer is competent and a reliable source of information (Schindler & Bickart, 2005). However, there was a lot more intensive language used in reviews on Beautify than in reviews on the blog. Intense language may reflect extreme arguments that can affect source credibility negatively (Li & Zhan, 2011). Therefore, it seems that consumers refrain from using too intensive language on the discussion threads of blogs. This may be explained by the weak presence of product usage experiences in the reviews, which indicates a lack of personal experiences with the products that are reviewed.

Thirdly, reviews on Beautify and on the blog are both primarily framed positively. Only a fourth of the reviews are negatively framed. Positive framing does not indicate as much credibility as negative framing (Cheung et al. 2009). Complaint messages are taken more seriously than messages that only praise the product. Therefore, the reviews that pointed out the weaknesses of the product were more likely to be seen as credible sources of information. It is uncommon for a negatively framed review to be written by a marketer, so this as well reflects trustworthiness.

In terms of normative determinants the reviews on Beautify also indicate more credibility. Beautify provides its readers features that help evaluate normative cues on the website. By providing pie charts on how many consumers recommend a product, or overall scores on how others rated the attributes of the product, makes it easier for a consumer to evaluate the information they are reading. The majority opinion of consumers has a strong effect on the credibility assessment of a consumer (Li & Zhan, 2011); therefore it is important that the platform displays normative cues that can be used to evaluate review credibility. Consensus among readers was strong in both review platforms which indicates credibility (Schindler & Bickart, 2005). When the majority of

consumers agree with the content of a review, the more trustworthy the information becomes.

As for review rating, neither reviews on Beautify or on the blog indicated credibility. Both platforms offered a feature for review rating. However, consumers did not use this feature in either channel. Without seeing how other readers have rated a review (e.g. helpful/not helpful) it is impossible to know how the majority of readers felt about the review. If the feature was used, a reader would be able to evaluate the credibility of the message by looking at previous reactions by other readers (Cheung et al. 2009). When both review sources are assessed in terms of all normative indicators, Beautify shows much more indications of credibility. Also the risk of amplified eWOM is smaller on in the reviews on Beautify because they had very little indication of marketing ambitions compared to the reviews on blogs that had a few more signs that could be seen as indications of amplified content (Herr et al. 1991).

The results of this study provide useful information to companies on how to develop content that is trustworthy and reliable in the eyes of consumers who are searching for information on their products. Moreover, the findings of the study imply that review websites like Beautify are more trustworthy sources of information than the discussion threads of blogs. Reviews on blogs often change the topic of the discussion from the initial product to something else entirely. Therefore, as a source of product information they did not serve the purpose as well as reviews on review websites. This may be explained by the fact that consumer-to-consumer interaction needs support from the website in order to fully blossom (Zhang & Watts, 2008). Lily.fi provides very little support in terms of technological resources. Also, online communities are more interactive than online commonplaces like Beautify, which may explain the frequent change of topic on the discussion threads.

It is also important to note, that consumers do not evaluate credibility in terms of just one single factor. In fact, a credibility assessment of a consumer is made up of a combination of different factors (Mendes-Filho & Tan, 2009). Even though one factor may lack in credibility, other factors may make up for inadequate factors. Therefore,

various elements take part in building the consumer's credibility judgment (Cheung et al. 2009).

If all the elements evaluated in this study were pulled into an ideal review that reflects a high level of credibility, the outcome might look something like in appendix 9. In this reproduced review by "Laura M" most of the elements that are likely to convince its reader are presented. Firstly, a black box is drawn over elements that strengthen source credibility. Here the review displays the profile picture of the author, who can be considered an attractive young person taking care of her appearance. There are virtual credentials available which list her as one of the top 10 reviewers on Beautify with a history of 111 previous reviews. Secondly, a yellow box is drawn over identity characteristics of the author, which may help the reader to find similarities with the writer and compare these characteristics to the provided profile picture. The reader is more convinced when the author resembles the way she describes herself (skin type, hair type and color, color of eyes). (Cheung et al. 2009)

Thirdly, a green box showcases the normative opinion concerning the rating of the review. Altogether 10 readers have found her review helpful by rating her review with the thumbs up feature. This convinces the reader that other users who have read the review felt it was helpful. Fourthly, the red and the blue boxes display two different sides of the product; What Laura M. liked about the product and what she thought was not great about it. Furthermore, in these boxes the grammatical structure uses point-format creating easily readable lists. Paragraphs further make the review easy to comprehend as well as the use of correct language (Li & Zhan, 2011).

Fifthly, evidence of personal product usage and experience is marked as red. Laura M. strongly describes the product from her own point of view that is based on how the product worked on her skin. This reflects a higher sense of argument quality (Cheung et al. 2009). Also, the amount of product features presented in the review is adequate: texture, price, fragrance, application, the effect on skin, tendency to irritate, moisturizing capability, and packaging. This supports the work of Li & Zhan (2011)

who state that when a review consists of a sufficient amount of features it is comprehensive and therefore more credible.

This particular review in appendix 9 is negatively framed, because the review does not recommend the product. However, by stating both the positive and the negative features of the product, the review gives a critical and knowledgeable impression (Li & Zhan, 2011). The review does not use any intensive language either that could weaken its credibility, but rather keeps a neutral tone without using any emotion-laden words that could unconvince the reader (Schindler & Bickart, 2005). To conclude, this mockup of an ideal online consumer review ranks high in terms of framing, argument quality, source credibility and normative cues which were all evaluated on the basis of the key supportive theories in table 2. It can set a good example to marketers engaging in conversation with consumers or to companies who search for influential ways to provide information to consumers that are potential buyers of their products.

### **Marketing implications**

Although marketers have acknowledged the importance of online consumer reviews, they have not taken enough part in the review process. Following online consumer reviews is an efficient way to keep up with consumer demand. In addition to putting more effort into the solicitation of online consumer reviews and online social interaction, marketers should stay alert and respond to both negative and positive reviews when needed. (Entrepreneur, 2014) As the modern e-commerce era continues to heat up, keeping up with consumer expectations and perspectives via online consumer reviews will become vital. Thus, companies need more advice on how consumers evaluate eWOM content, as well as on what product information is considered useful when making a purchase-decision.

Moreover, the role of online consumer reviews is important in terms of eWOM advertising. Marketing professionals need to gain deeper understanding on how persuasive power is generated by eWOM and use this knowledge to bring themselves closer to consumer discussions. Without this acknowledgement marketers will fail to make efficient decisions regarding eWOM advertising. This study provides information

on how to assess the credibility, thus persuasiveness, of eWOM communication through determinants found in online consumer reviews. Moreover, the study provides a deeper understanding on how eWOM credibility in online consumer reviews presents itself in the context of cosmetics products. Marketers are therefore able to identify the most helpful reviews and increase the usefulness of their website to potential customers. Additionally, marketers can use the most credible online reviews to learn more about consumers and the experiences they share with each other. Especially product usage experiences are valuable pieces of information that can be utilized in product development.

Furthermore, the advice provided by this study can also be utilized in, for example, marketing texts, consumer discussions and eWOM advertising. When producing texts, marketers can use the practical advice provided by this study by following a few useful tips in figure 11.

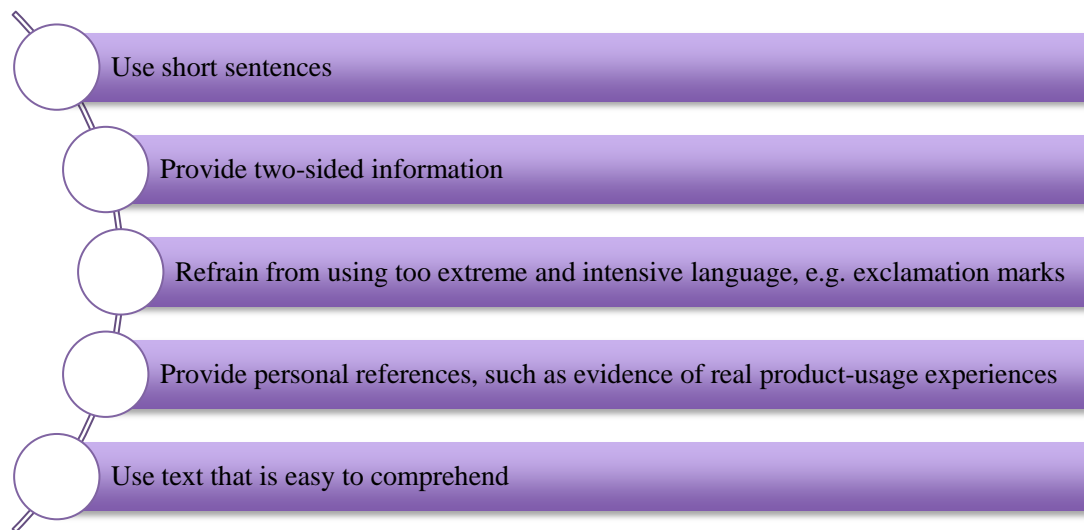


Figure 11. Practical tips for marketers

This study can also be of help to testimonial advertising, such as in print media, newspapers and magazines, where the testimonial of a consumer is used to convince



readers. The credibility of consumer testimonials retrieved from textual discourse is essential and needs proper evaluation before it can be used in advertising. Therefore, advertisers can evaluate the credibility of these testimonials based on the factors analyzed in this study to avoid using dishonest and faulty consumer information.

So far, online consumer reviews are known as an anonymous form of eWOM. However, online consumer reviews are gradually building stronger links to social networks. The future may very well consist of online consumer reviews that provide more evidence on the reviewer's identity due to better access to social profiles. When this visibility increases, also the credibility and trustworthiness of consumer reviews online increases. (Entrepreneur, 2014)

As a result of online social interaction continuing to grow and reviewers becoming identifiable, online consumer reviews will become more personalized. This enables a review to be tailored personally to each reader bringing together reviews from consumers that have similar interests. Furthermore, the enormous growth of online consumer reviews will force websites to find more efficient and smarter ways to extract and display review information. Consumers do not have the time to scroll through thousands of consumer reviews. Instead, they are looking for the best "snapshot" of the information they are seeking. Therefore, it will be a great advantage to future companies to be able to display the most important information and to develop user-friendly, well-optimized platforms for consumer-to-consumer interaction. (Entrepreneur, 2014)

Furthermore, websites such as Beautify should use existent consumer studies as a basis for developing their platform according to the current needs of information seekers. TNS Gallup (2015) divides the consumers of cosmetics products into five different consumer groups. This information could be used to develop more efficient eWOM platforms:

- **Avoiders:** Consumers who do not want to spend too much time or money on their appearance. They appreciate comfort and effortlessness over style. They do not enjoy shopping, and only shop when they really need to buy something.

- **Practical consumers:** Consumers who care about their appearance, but keep an eye on how much they spend. They aim to make smart purchase decisions and are prone to make only a couple of purchases annually. Affordable price is a deal breaker for them and they purchase their products on sale.
- **Style searchers:** Consumers who like to go shopping. They are prone to make impulse purchases, but try not to spend too much. They are insecure about which products suit them and choose cosmetics brands that are known of their good quality. They search advertisements for beauty tips.
- **Individuals:** Consumers who have their own individual style. They are more interested in the quality and brand than mainstream trends or price. They do not shop without a specific need. Making decisions is easy for them because they know what they want.
- **Fashion conscious shoppers:** Consumers who know what is in and what is out. They want to stand out from the crowd and put a lot of time and money in their appearance. They believe shopping has a positive effect on their state of mind and visit stores regularly to browse novelties.

By examining the different consumer groups and their preferences, consumer review websites and company sites, such as Lumene.fi, can tailor their platforms to best serve consumers seeking for credible information on cosmetics products. For instance, a platform that enables a consumer to post a video tutorial or link their Instagram or Pinterest account may have the potential to provide more personal evidence and create a more dynamic, trustworthy environment. In order to help consumers in their purchase decision process, online platforms should offer helpful product review snapshots generated by other consumers (Entrepreneur, 2014).

## 5 SUMMARY

Online consumer reviews have become an important tool for consumers who seek for product information, especially nowadays when the market overflows with different sorts of alternatives. Today's consumers take time to research products before making a purchase decision. The exchange of information between consumers on the Internet is overwhelming as more and more consumer-to-consumer exchange takes place in various different virtual platforms. Online consumer reviews are particularly popular sources of information, because they give access to a vast amount of peer opinions, experiences and evaluations. They enable a fast and easy way to obtain information, for instance on price, quality or functionality. Furthermore, online consumer reviews are considered more trustworthy than traditional expert reviews or company descriptions. As online consumer reviews have gradually grown into a market phenomenon, they have also drawn attention from researchers during the past years.

The purpose of the study was to describe and analyze how consumers evaluate the credibility in online consumer reviews. The study distinguished between the factors that indicate credibility in online consumer reviews specifically concentrating on online consumer reviews written on cosmetics products of Lumene. The case choice was made on the grounds of high suitability, since cosmetics products usually generate rich and lengthy descriptions due to their multifaceted nature, therefore making them an interesting study subject. In addition, the case was not only an adequate pick for the study because of its multidimensionality, but also because it was of personal interest to the researcher. The following research questions conveyed the purpose of the study:

1. What indicators do consumers use to evaluate the credibility of online consumer reviews?
2. How do credibility indicators differ between reviews written on review websites and reviews written on blogs?

The determinants for evaluating the credibility in online reviews were based on the available literature and previous research. Knowing that strong ties are rarely present in an online setting, alternative ways to determine credibility were analyzed in order to understand how consumers are able to tell between trustworthy and untrustworthy reviews.

Indicators that can be used to evaluate credibility in online reviews are divided into informational determinants and normative determinants. Informational determinants are based on the content of the received information and normative determinants based on other people's opinions about the received information. Informational and normative elements make up the receiver's information-credibility judgment. Different cues for bias and validity were also taken into consideration. Cues for bias include the lack of negative information, the lack of authenticity and the website owner. Cues for validity include personal references, consensus among reviewers, wording, and the identity of the consumer. These cues were integrated into informational and normative determinants to avoid unnecessary recurrence. Therefore, the study followed a more comprehensive and unified set of evaluation factors to help assess the credibility of online consumer reviews.

Online consumer reviews were collected from a review website called Beautify.fi and discussion threads from the blog of Saara Sarvas on Lily.fi. The case study focused on consumer reviews written on the products of a Finnish market leading cosmetics brand, Lumene. Altogether 292 online consumer reviews were collected during three months (February 2014 to April 2014). 161 reviews originated from Beautify.fi and 131 reviews from the comment field of the blog. The data was collected in the form of recorded, transcribed materials. This textual data consisted of posted online consumer reviews and comments, but also visual elements such as photos. Only online reviews written by consumers were taken into consideration, and the most fruitful and most commented review threads were collected as data. Half of the reviews collected from the blog were pulled out of the data due to off-topic subjects that could not be considered relevant.

A mixed methods research was conducted which used netnography as its research approach. Netnography was strengthened by content analysis in order to conduct a reliable and comprehensive study. To ensure validity, similar factors reported in past literature were used to assess frequency and to link the content analysis to theoretical foundations. The analysis of the empirical data was interwoven with the building of a theoretical framework for eWOM credibility. A synthesis of the theoretical framework was built and later adapted to the findings of the study on reviews on Beautify and reviews on the blog.

The research finds the most essential factors that consumers use to evaluate credibility in online consumer reviews: argument quality, information framing, source credibility, information consistency, normative cues and amplified eWOM. All these factors are likely to increase or decrease the credibility of an online consumer review; however the actual credibility assessment of the consumer is the synopsis of all these determinants.

Argument quality is the strength of the received information which can be evaluated on four dimensions: ease of comprehension, evidence presence, opposing viewpoints and comprehensiveness. Information framing is the content of the message which can be evaluated in terms of the message being positively or negatively framed. Negative framing has stronger influence than positive framing, as people tend to avoid risks and a negative aspect in a review might keep them from making a bad purchase decision.

Source credibility is the ability of a message to provide accurate and truthful information. It can be evaluated by indicators of product usage, attractiveness, virtual credentials, language intensity and wording. Information consistency is how accordant the message is with the prior belief of the reader. This factor could not be evaluated based on the empirical data collected for this study.

As for normative cues, the study used review consistency and review rating to evaluate credibility. Review consistency was evaluated on how consistent the review was with the experiences other reviewers had had with the product. Review rating was evaluated in terms of available peer ratings or scores.

An online review needs to have an honest point of view that is trustworthy and shows personal experience with the product. Consumers believe reviews that are written by real people on real life product experiences. Furthermore, the more information there is available on the reviewer, the easier it is for a reader to assess the credibility of the source. The most important factor is that the reviewers must have experienced the product themselves and thus product usage plays an essential role when a consumer evaluates the credibility of a review, especially in the case of cosmetics products that are very rich in characteristics and very sensitive in regard to personal features.

A credible review brings out both the pros and cons of the product and supports its claims with good arguments, advice and examples. Consumers are more likely to see a review credible when it provides a critical point of view by offering both positive and negative arguments. Since negative information has a positive effect on the credibility of a review, it is important that the message not only brings out the positive aspects of a product. Thus, arguments that show criticism are considered to be more honest with a smaller risk of a hidden marketing agenda.

The credibility of an online consumer review is also assessed in terms of language. Using proper and correct language shows the reader that the source is reliable. Accurate spelling and clear and specific product descriptions are essential credibility factors. Language should also avoid from being too intensive. Extreme arguments and strong words affect credibility negatively. When a message contains exclamation marks or expresses emotion with strong words, it is less likely to be considered a reliable source of information. Moreover, language should be neutral with no implications of commercial motivations. The credibility of a review suffers heavily, when there are marketing interests concealed in the message.

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## APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Occurrence of informational determinants (Beautify.fi and Saara Sarvas - blog)

		BEAUTIFY.FI	BLOG DISCUSSION THREAD
ARGUMENT QUALITY	<b>Ease of comprehension</b>		
	<i>Point-format</i>	2 %	1 %
	<i>Paragraphs</i>	25 %	10 %
	<b>Evidence presence</b>		
	<i>Supportive claims</i>	86 %	35 %
	<b>Opposing viewpoints</b>		
	<i>One-sided</i>	42 %	74 %
	<i>Two-sided</i>	58 %	26 %
	<b>Comprehensiveness</b>		
	<i>Average message length (word count)</i>	49	46
	<i>Average number of features</i>	4	3
FRAMING	<b>Framing</b>		
	<i>Negative framing</i>	24 %	21 %
	<i>Positive framing</i>	76 %	79 %
SOURCE CREDIBILITY	<b>Usage experience</b>		
	<i>Reference to own experience</i>	81 %	63 %
	<b>Attractiveness</b>		
	<i>Picture of the author</i>	32 %	7 %
	<b>Language intensity</b>		
	<i>Intensive positive cues</i>	47 %	36 %
	<i>Intensive negative cues</i>	22 %	7 %



## Appendix 2. Example of an online consumer review on Beautify.fi



Arvostellut [Anskubansku](#) Huhtikuu 01, 2014  
[Beautifyn TOP 10 -arvostelija](#) - [arvosteluja 137 kpl](#)

Mulla ei ollut kovin suuria odotuksia tätä kyseistä CC-voidetta kohtaan, kunnes näin Sokoksessa testereitä ja päätin napata sellasen mukaani! Yhdestä testeristä riitti mulle tasan viikoksi meikkivoiteet, aika uskomatonta :o Koostumus on ihanan kevyen oloinen ja ei ollenkaan sellainen kuiva. Levitin tätä ecotoolsin buffing brushilla, jolla sai tosi hyvää jälkeä aikaan! :) Oon tosi positiivisesti yllättynyt tän tuotteen pysyvyydestä myös. Kesti mun normaalilla iholla koulupäivän ajan tosi hyvin (olin luullut, että koostumuksesta johtuen ei olisi niin kestävää.) Päivän mittaan ja illalla alkaa nenänpieleet vähän kiiltää, mutta asia oli helposti korjattavissa pienellä fiksauksella :) Rakastuin tähän Color Correctin voiteeseeni niin paljon, että voisin ehdottomasti ostaa kokonaisen putelin omaksi. :) Kasvoissa mulla ei oo sen kummempaa peitettävää ole (paitsi silmänaluset, jotka muuten peittyivät yllättävän hyvin!!) ja pientä punotusta poskissa ja nekin peittyivät tosi hyvin. Suosittelen siis kokeilemaan!

**Hinta: €€ Suosittelen tuotetta!**


Kokonaisarvosana	5.0	<i>Hiusten väri:</i> ruskea
Kokonaisuus	5.0	<i>Hiusten sävy:</i> lämmin
Laatu	4.5	<i>Hiustyyppi:</i> suora
Pakkaus	4.5	<i>Hiuslaatu:</i> keskipaksu
Ainesosat	4.5	<i>Ihotyyppi:</i> normaali
		<i>Ihonväri:</i> keskisävyinen
		<i>Ihonsävy:</i> lämmin
		<i>Silmienväri:</i> vihreä


 Kommentteja (0)

Oliko tämä arvostelu hyödyllinen?
 

 1
  0

## Appendix 3. Example of an online consumer review on Beautify.fi




Arvostellut [haidy](#) Marraskuu 02, 2012  
[Beautifyn TOP 500 -arvostelija](#) - [arvosteluita 1 kpl](#)



Valikoima sävyissä on loistava, löytyy joka makuun! Minulta löytyykin jo melkein joka sävyssä.  
 Todella hyvä hinta-laatu suhde. Tuote on koostumukseltaan melko tahmea, mutta ei silti tunnu huulissa liika tahmaiselta, vaan levittyy hyvin!  
 Itse käytän nude-sävyjä päivämeikkiin ja tummempia iltaisin.  
 Suosittelen lämpimästi!!

**Hinta: € Suosittelen tuotetta!**

Kokonaisarvosana	4.0	<i>Hiusten väri:</i> vaaleavruskea
Kokonaisuus	4.0	<i>Hiusten sävy:</i> lämmin
Laatu	3.0	<i>Hiustyyppi:</i> kihara
Pakkaus	4.0	<i>Hiuslaatu:</i> paksu
Ainesosat	3.0	<i>Ihotyyppi:</i> normaali
		<i>Ihonväri:</i> keskisävyinen
		<i>Ihonsävy:</i> neutraali
		<i>Silmienväri:</i> vihreä


 Kommentteja (0)

Oliko tämä arvostelu hyödyllinen?
 


 1
 
 0

## Tuotetta suosittelee

1

**LUMENE<sup>®</sup>**  
**NATURAL**  
**COFFEE** •  
100% Arabica




## Appendix 5. Example of an online consumer review from the blog of Saara Sarvas


Irkkuliini
Kauneuden jäljillä
13.3.2015 09:04


Ihanan kuultava ja luonnollinen lopputulos Nudella. Keväällä iho saa hehkua ja ollakin hieman kiiltävä. Itse en ole koskaan pitänyt liian mattaisesta lopputuloksesta, on se sitten trendikästä tai ei... :)

VASTAA KOMMENTTIIN

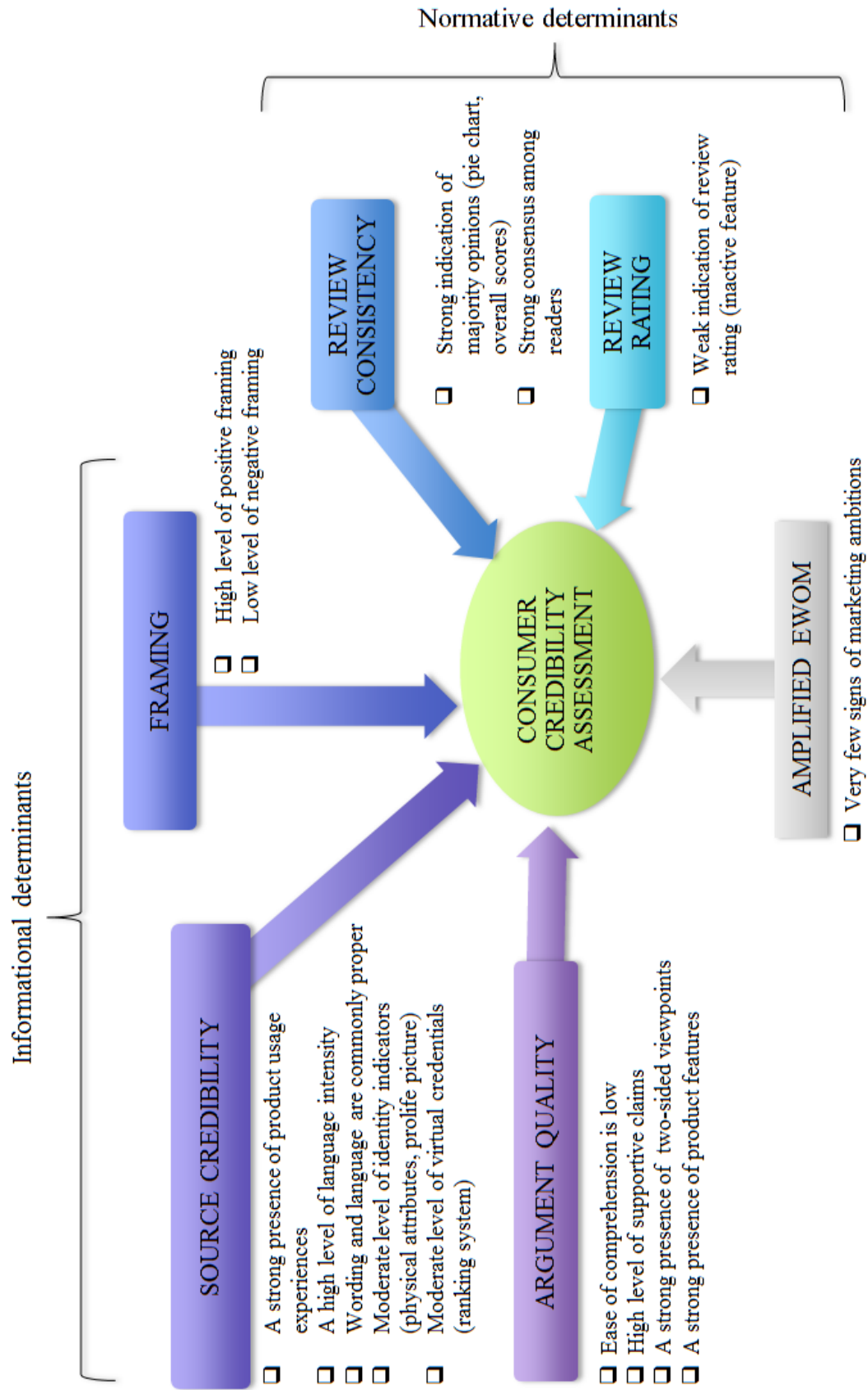
## Appendix 6. Example of an online consumer review from the blog of Saara Sarvas

hako (Ei varmistettu)
13.3.2015 09:51


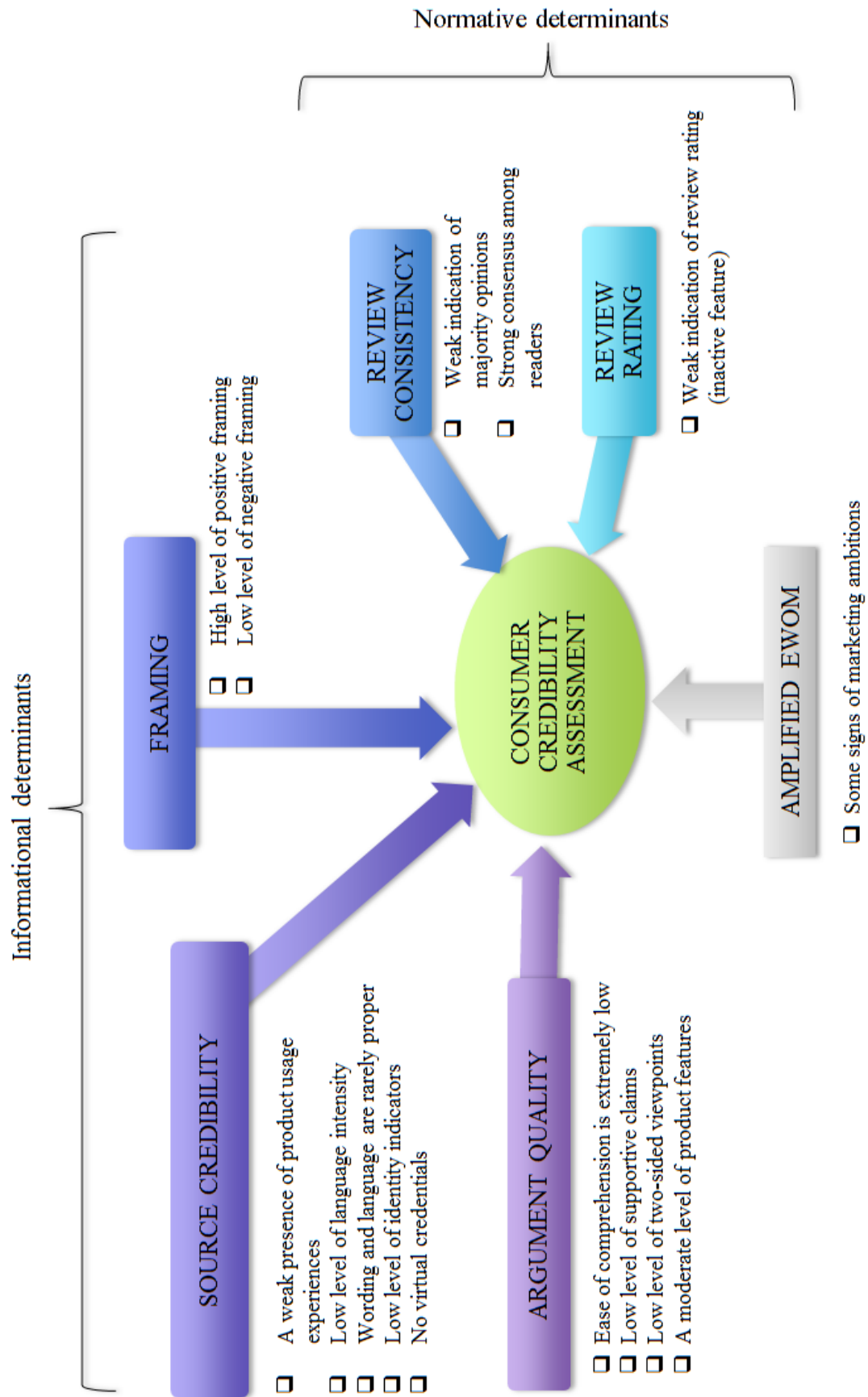
Rakastuin tuohon Nude -meikkivoiteeseen aika kovasti. Omalla sekaihollani se tuntui pysyvän paremmin koko päivän kiiltelemättä kuin Blur (toki molempien kohdalla kiinnitän meikkivoiteen vielä puuterilla).

VASTAA KOMMENTTIIN

## Appendix 7. Evaluating the credibility of online reviews on Beautyfy



Appendix 8. Evaluating the credibility of online reviews on the blog



## Appendix 9. Example of an ideal online consumer review



Review by **Laura M.** December 14, 2014  
 Top 10 reviewer on Beautify  
 Amount of reviews: 111



I am ambivalent toward this product and hence the less-than-perfect review rating.

What I like about it:

- The light, gel like texture is lovely
- I like the citrusy fragrance which is quite refreshing
- The price 12.99€ for 50ml is not exactly cheap but at least affordable
- It has not broken me out

What's not great about it:

- It tends to be "glowy" in a bad way. Upon application it gives my skin an instant glow that quickly transforms to greasiness. With such light texture, I did not expect it to be greasy.
- It could be irritating to certain spots of my skin (around the nose).
- It's moisturizing property is not superior.
- I'd prefer a dispenser type of package rather than having to dig my finger into the tub. Not very hygienic.

Bottom line: to me, this is a take it or leave it product. I spent 13 euros for a little experimentation and am not entirely satisfied. For the price, there might be better products out there. So I will not purchase it again if I run out.

**Total score:** 3.0

**Quality:** 3.0

**Packaging:** 2.5

**Ingredients:** 3.5

**Skin:** Acne-prone, Fair, Warm

**Hair:** Blond, Straight, Fine

**Eyes:** Brown